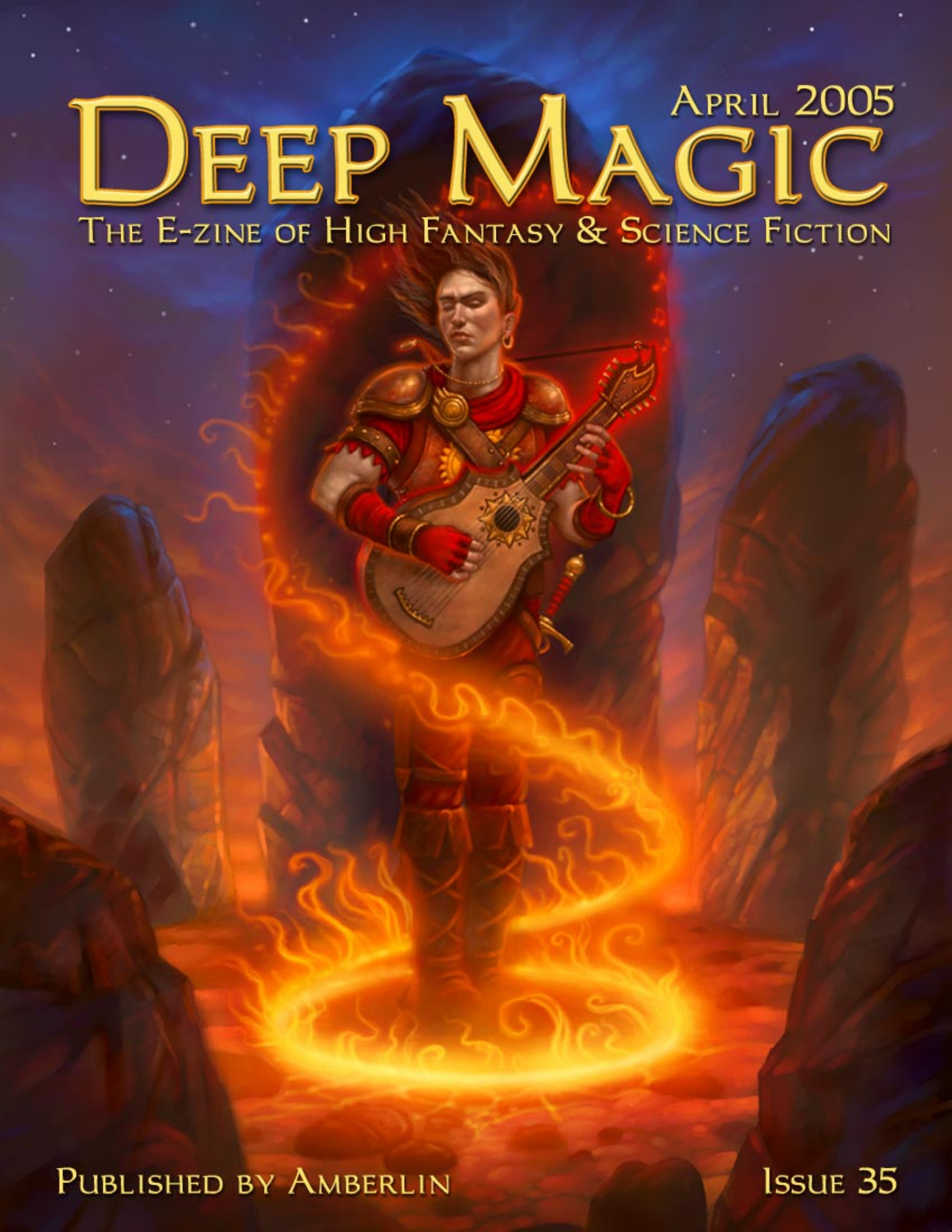
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Cover by Howard Lyon
"Brotherhood of the Burning Heart"

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April 2005

It is always tempting to begin the April editor's note with a gag since the 1st is April Fool's day. We could say something like 'alas, this is our final issue' or claim to have stories written by Robin Hobb or George R. R. Martin. But we're an honest bunch. Instead, we offer you our heartfelt welcome to April's issue of Deep Magic. Oh, and your shoes are untied.

Our cover artist this month is the inestimable Howard Lyon – you might recognize some of his work in Wizards of the Coast material. Our authors have spared no one this month, starting with Jean Meyer's light-hearted comic fantasy, *A Midwinter-Night's Nightmare*. Then we are entertained with another story by Deep Magic veteran Michael Graves in the tale of two battling armies from two opposing cultures in *One Last Kiss, One Last Caress*. And our sci-fi story this month delves into the inner demons found in the semiconductor industry. JT Slane is back with a twisted tale called *IMP01*.

Also this month, we begin another novel serialization. Mark Reeder plunges us into a brilliant other-world saga called *Shadowloom*. We will continue this story over the next few issues and hope you enjoy the extra reading these next few months.

We are fortunate to have Lynn Flewelling (author of the *Nightrunner* series and the Tamir Trilogy) with us this month, who has written a wonderful article on the do's and don'ts of creating characters.

As you can see, we have a full house this month. We also have a special announcement in store for next month's issue as we draw to the close of three years of publishing Deep Magic every month. Thirty-six issues is a grand milestone. With your help and support, we hope to journey much farther.

Enjoy!
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication.

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. **We have a new due date for Writing Challenge submissions!** They will be printed one month later, and you have longer to submit them. Please note the deadline date below.

April 2005 Writing Challenge
Entries due May 10, 2005

This month's challenge is inspired in part by this month's cover by Howard Lyon. Bards, Minstrels, Storytellers...whatever their name, whatever their role, musicians have long had a role in fantasy. Perhaps they are the comic relief, or maybe the narrator. Sometimes they just provide a little atmosphere. The challenge this month is to create a scene involving one or more of these minstrels. They can be a main character, your narrator, or maybe just the evening's entertainment at the local tavern. Be creative, have fun, and keep it to 1000 words or less.

Selections from the February 2005 Writing Challenge

On the Trail to Genji
Sour Negotiations

The above stories were selected from the February challenge, which was to write a scene using primarily the senses of taste or smell.

Don't forget the March challenge due April 10:

This challenge is designed to help you make a conscious decision on how to write elements of back story into a story. We have provided facts for your back story. Decide which are essential to the telling of your story and fit them in as you deem best. Feel free to write any type of story you fancy, based upon these facts and others you create that will be necessary for your story. Add to these basic facts enough about your characters to make them interesting, but try to tell a real story, or at least enough of one to hook the reader into wanting more. You are limited to 1000 words. The facts you need to use can be found in this topic on our forums. Best of luck.

On the Trail to Genji

By A.M. Stickel

I awoke to the touch of silk upon my cheek. My eyes and ears were covered so that these senses were blocked. Yet, how my lash wounds and poor belly throbbed in concert! Aching limbs protested the abuse of riding bound like a sack of grain upon the camel of the Nuraji. Alas, the notorious Veiled Men had ambushed my trading party. Trusted caravan guards had run away like the sons of dogs they were at the mere sight of the red-robed thieves.

The silk let me know more serious torture was to begin. I let go of my expectations of wealth, pride and freedom, and settled my mind for the present, determined to endure for the sake of life itself.

Lying on the floor of my tormentor's tent, I inhaled the perfume of the tender, shapely feet that trod his rugs. The bare toe of my right foot touched one of the plush pillows where I knew he reclined to enjoy my discomfort.

While I lay, filthy and foul, my crusted wounds festering, I felt but a few drops of the rose-scented water in which his serving girls bathed him, its vapors tickling my nose. One dainty foot kicked me from my curled position so that I rolled onto my painful back.

My mouth shriveled with thirst at the thought of the cool water and nectar he must be enjoying once his bath was over, and he had been robed for the feast. To mock my girth, which was, regrettably at the time, considerable, he used it as his footstool while he dined. The spicy aroma of his banquet teased my nostrils until my head swam. Aah! I knew good curry from long, loving acquaintance with it in its harmonious mingling with lamb, fish, rice, freshly baked flat bread, and my favorite, honeyed figs. Knowing I would not even be allowed to lick the crumbs from the rug, I bit down hard on my gag.

I prayed to the Most High. Would my family send the ransom soon? Would this Nuraj even release me alive if they did send the ransom? Or would he follow the Nuraji custom and pickle my body in brine to send them portions in jars? I should never have risked the trail to Genji.

The air of passage from busy feet finally ceased. I realized that the master had retired for the night among his women. Although my bowels had frozen, I wet myself. Men's rough hands rolled me outside into the shock of the night air. It was just as well. Memories of delightful nights spent being spoiled by my own women had begun to crowd my thoughts despite my sorry state. Could they ever welcome me back when I had been thus dishonored? My dear mother was still alive, but once she learned of my fate, she might not survive. I was her only son. My wives had given her no grandsons.

The campfire smell began to be tainted by that of burning flesh. The wrappings that covered my ears could not muffle the other captives' screams. Others, less fortunate than I, provided the bloodthirsty thieves with their evening's entertainment. This I could not bear. I made my third wish.

Sour Negotiations

By Christina Schneider

This was bad.

Pai was braced between the wall and an upturned steel table. She ground her teeth as the metal slab jolted under the enemy's steady fire. The princess's two bodyguards were unconscious, completely 'paste-ed.'

Pai gripped the weapon in her hand and sprang from hiding. With a smooth movement, she flung the Epicurian delight across the room. There was a loud 'smack!' as orange pastry filling splattered the Suefey guard's face. He staggered backward, clawing at the crust, but the gooey pastry wouldn't budge.

"Yes!" Pai cheered. She dodged behind the table as a barrage of mini roasted Eez rained down.

The normally spotless conference room was covered in a colorful array of alien sauces, glazes, and side-dishes. Suefey's and Epicura's finest cuisine gave rise to a forest of luscious scents. Succulent sweets, tart sours, and zesty spicy aromas wafted around the room. It was enough to make anybody's stomach growl. Too bad Pai couldn't stop to enjoy it. There was a battle at hand!

"Resistance is futile, Princess!" Prince Egoe of Suefey called from behind the stack of chairs.

Pai snorted, licking the sweet mint frosting from her finger. It reminded her of the upcoming celebration on her home-world. It was to be a party in honor of the treaty signing, but negotiations weren't going exactly as planned.

"You will sign the contract," the Prince continued. "The recipe will be mine!"

"Don't be such a ham!" Pai grabbed a green Kelree cheese. She jumped out, flinging it in his direction.

Egoe and his other guard jumped up and launched a brown Kig in the air. The zingy melon flew too high and got caught on the chandelier. The Suefeians ducked back as the cheese smacked into their barricade.

Pai grabbed a platter of steamed Comainia veggies from the table. The wonderful fresh aroma stirred memories of more peaceful days, days before the Culinary War. . . Oh well, those days were over.

Sampling a salty sprig, she leapt from hiding to throw the platter's contents. Egoe and the guard were ready. Pai cried out as two platters of gluey Jimello smacked into her. The dessert pinned her arms to the wall, sizzling and bubbling as it hardened. Pai grimaced, trying to pull herself free.

It was no use. She was caught.

The Suefeians dashed out of cover, victorious. Prince Egoe stood in front of her, smirking.

"Well, well, Princess . . ." He shook his head, sighing. "Are you ready to sign the treaty now?" Egoe held the paper up.

"Never!" Pai stuck her nose in the air.

Egoe turned away. "Very well," he smiled sadly. "I didn't want to resort to this. . ." He picked a roasted leg of Sickenbird from the table. "You've left me no choice princess!" Egoe

shoved the food under her nose.

"No!" Pai screamed turning her head away. The sweet smell of the singed flesh filled her nose. Images of Suefey cooking fires flared in her mind: scenes of live Oceanfood, roasting Chikolo wings, and stuffing! Oh! The stuffing! This death had to stop!!

"Get it away!" Pai shrieked hysterically.

"Haha! Give up? Vegetarian!" He laughed.

"Yes! Take it AWAY!" Pai sobbed. "I'll sign . . ."

Egoe lowered the leg. "Tell me, Princess, how do you like the bitter taste of defeat?"

The prince and the guard unstuck Pai from the wall and dragged her over to the table. Egoe slammed the document on the table.

Pai put her hands on her hips. "I can't sign it without a pen."

The prince and the guard began searching their pockets.

Pai rolled her eyes.

The Kig melon was still hanging askew from the chandelier. The bolt that attached the metal frame to the ceiling was giving way.

"I got one, sir!" The guard pulled a pen from his pocket. Ego snatched it and shoved it under Pai's nose.

"Now sign the treaty!"

Pai took the pen and bent down to the paper.

"Oops. . ." She dropped the pen and it rolled under the table. "I'll get it!"

Snap!

Pai ducked under the table as the chandelier broke.

The rack of metal fell on the guard with a 'Clunk!' and the bitter Kig melon broke over Egoe's head. They both collapsed, incapacitated.

Pai crawled out from under the table. She tore the treaty paper to shreds.

Her family's secret recipe was safe for the time being. Pai cast one last look at the prince. The melon's acidic juice was eating through the floor.

"Death by melon." She shuddered. "A death nobody should be served."

One Last Kiss, One Last Caress

By Michael Graves

As the enemy fell back from our walls once more, I took the opportunity to rest weary arms on the worn stone crenellations. I raised my face to the sky, the helmet I had been wearing long since cast aside. The sun, not yet at its full height, touched my cheeks like the warm kiss of a lover, while a slight breeze ran its fingers through the sweat-stained hair at my temples. Soon enough the warmth of the desert sun would increase to a burning torment, but for now the analogy was enough to return my mind to a happier time. Strange to think that it had been only a scant two weeks earlier.

* * *

It had been Talmyra's kisses warming my cheeks then, her hands gently stroking my hair as we stole a last night together. There had been passion aplenty that night, yet it was the peace and silence we shared as we lay in each other's arms that I remember most. That and the sadness dulling the usual sparkle in her emerald eyes as she gazed down at me. Propped beside me on one elbow, her hair a flaming shower cascading over my chest, she had traced the contours of my face with strong slender fingers. "Stay with me, my love. Do not set foot on this path to foolishness."

An ululating howl dragged my mind back from the shadows of memory. It was a sound to chill the blood of the most hardened warrior. It was the sound of the Dal-Purai as they charged toward our feeble fortress once more.

I could only agree with her. I had known even then that what we set ourselves to do was indeed folly. Most of us did. "The king has set his mind to this, Tally. He will not be advised otherwise. And my place is at his side, for good or ill. But I will return, and when I do I would like you to become my wife. Will you wait for me?"

She had laughed with joy at that, and our kisses had swiftly turned to more energetic pursuits. "I would love to see your father's face when you tell him you intend to wed such a woman as I!"

Her eyes held the watery gaze of suppressed tears when I dressed the following morning. One last kiss we had shared, along with two promises. Mine to return, hers to wait. Then I had left the little wooden shack in the forest to join the thousands of others who would march to disaster in the lands of the Dal-Purai.

* * *

An ululating howl dragged my mind back from the shadows of memory. It was a sound to chill the blood of the most hardened warrior. It was the sound of the Dal-Purai as they charged toward our feeble fortress once more. The rising warble of the scream was designed to instil

continued on page 24

Whaddya Mean They're Not Real?

By Lynn Flewelling

How often have you found yourself nearing the end of a book and dreading reaching that last page because it means parting ways with the characters? Through some alchemy of words, the author has created people as immediate and familiar as your own friends. When the book is done, you miss them.

That's good writing.

Character, setting, and plot are integral, interrelated elements in fiction. Someone somewhere has to do something. The type of story you want to tell defines the sort of characters you'll need, or vice versa. In my case, characters tend to show up first, demanding I make a place for them.

They usually show up with a few basics in place, like gender, age, what they do for a living, and the beginnings of a personality and some aspirations. They're sketchy at first, but once I've got those basics down, I can develop and fine tune as I write. I might think I know who they are on page one, but by page forty they've morphed into someone else. At the very least, I know a great deal more about them than I did.

I find real people fascinating and tend to approach my fictional characters as if they are someone I'm interviewing or analyzing. There also seems to be an unspoken internal logic that kicks in as the character moves through the plot and interacts with the other characters I've got going by now.

Some writers plan everything out in advance. They have character profiles and plot outlines and index cards filled with notes tacked up in tidy order all over their office walls. I don't work that way. I usually have a general idea of what I want to happen to my character between Point A and Point Z, but how they get there takes shape as I go. I "see" the story like a movie as I write; one idea flows from another as I work. Characters become clearer in my mind, more real. It's an organic, intuitive, dreaming-with-your-eyes-open process, at least on the surface, but somewhere down in my back brain some logical self is saying, "If A happens, then B will result. Don't like that? Then let's try a different course of action."

My characters do have a way of balking if I try to force them in a direction they don't want to go. That may sound a little 'woo woo' to some of you, but it's just the function of the creative mind drawing from the subconscious. At least that's my theory, and I'm sticking to it. If you trust your imagination, it will do a lot of the work for you.

So that's the big picture on the creative process. I'm not going to bore you with lists of basic elements—physical appearance, clothing, etc. If you're reading this article, you probably know the basics. Instead, I'm going to go straight to some more advanced advice.

Flewelling's First Law of Fantasy Character Development: Start with Reality. The best learning tools for creating characters are everywhere. People. I can't speak for all writers, but I'm a lifelong people-watcher and snoop. I study strangers everywhere I go. I eavesdrop on conversations in the next booth at restaurants and watch how people's faces move compared to what's coming out of their mouths. Everything catches my eye: skin tone, features, clothing styles, smells, and deformities. I notice that someone strikes me as attractive and try to

analyze why. I collect magazine pictures and sit in movies thinking, "Oh yeah, he could play my character X." I worked as a journalist for a while and that was great; I got paid to be nosy. At parties, I catch myself interrogating people rather than making small talk. It's all grist for the mill. Never forget that your greatest resource as a writer is elbowing you from all sides.

Flewelling's Second Law: Good characters don't have to be beautiful and beautiful characters don't have to be good. It's tempting to gift your favorite hero or heroine with all the graces, but frankly, that kind of character isn't very interesting. Don't turn your characters into caricatures.

Flewelling's Third Law: Flaws and Quirks: Less is More. Real people are a sum of their flaws. Giving your characters weaknesses and warts adds veracity, if done well. If your character has a harelip, a speech impediment, or is claustrophobic, it should matter. Does it affect their ability to accomplish a goal? Does it affect how others react to them? How has it shaped their personality over the course of their lifetime? Is it something that's made them stronger, or something to be overcome?

I'm a lifelong Sherlock Holmes fan and have read those stories dozens of times because I enjoy those characters so much. When I first read the stories as a starry-eyed pre teen, Holmes seemed very dashing and heroic. He was the hero, and therefore, he had to be flawless. But reading those same character descriptions many, many times as a jaded adult, I see a very different man. Holmes was a lousy flat mate: rude, inconsiderate, abrupt, arrogant, condescending, twitchy. He was also brilliant, capable of great kindness, and brave to a fault, but it's still amazing that Watson never clocked him. Ah, but on the other hand, that tells you a lot about Watson, too, doesn't it? Tricky Conan Doyle played these two characters off one another brilliantly. Watson never tells us Holmes can be an arrogant bastard, he shows us, yet at the same time tempers our reaction through his own forbearance. Both characters are a sum of their flaws and strengths, and the contrast between the two further illuminates the characters for the reader.

Which brings me to:

Flewelling's Fourth Law: Control The Reader Through Narrative Point of View (POV). Readers see your story through the eyes of the narrator, or narrators. A first person "I" narrator shows us the world from a limited, biased angle. Mark Twain's Huck Finn or Anthony Burgess's A Clockwork Orange narrators suck the reader into their own mindset. Clockwork's Alex is a violent sociopath, yet most readers find themselves sympathizing with him, because Burgess does such a good job of making him a real and very charismatic voice in our heads. Huck, on the other hand, is a decent, fair-minded kid who honestly believes he's going to Hell because he transgresses against the prevailing rules of his society and helps a slave friend escape. Huck talks like a racist—a fact which has caused some ridiculous book bannings by shortsighted critics who can't read between the lines—yet he acts nobly, even against his better judgment. Both Huck and Alex are what English majors and we pros called an "unreliable narrator," and they are a lot of fun to play with. A clever reader will take note when what a character tells us doesn't square with the apparent reality.

Third person single POV narrator—"He did/said/thought that"—works somewhat the same as first person. The writer is still limiting the reader's view of the world to the perceptions of a single character, and his/her interactions with others. Anne Rice does this well in her early vampire novels. Louis and Lestat are so charming and engaging that it comes as a shock when

you remember that they'd invite you to dinner as the main course, not a guest.

A modification of this is to use multiple POV characters. I use this a lot. From one section or chapter to another, the reader sees the story/world through the eyes of a different cast member, together with their opinions and unique knowledge. One reason to do this is to build suspense by having the reader know more than any one character. You see the train wreck about to happen, but those involved cannot. This takes some finesse, since each POV character has to be well developed, and you can't have too many, or the reader looses track of who's who. You also have to have them make regular appearances before the reader forgets who they are. If you aren't familiar with my work (tsk tsk!) you probably know Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. It's a perfect example of this technique. Another fine example from outside the genre is William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*. Each chapter is "told" by a different member of a dysfunctional Southern family transporting a body to a distant town by wagon. You hear about the same events from each of them, including the dead woman, but each POV paints a very different picture of the others, colored by secrets and lies. It's an amazing piece of writing and I highly recommend it.

Flewelling's Fifth Law: Voice Is Everything. As I noted earlier, I see the story taking shape like a movie in my mind's eye. These movies aren't silent films, either. I "hear" the voices of the characters, their accents, the cadence and rhythm of their words. It's my job to make the reader hear them, too. You can reveal a lot about a character by how they speak and what they say: emotional state, intelligence, where they're from, how they feel about another character or event. Are they lying to themselves or someone else? Are they telling the truth even if it's dangerous?

This is done through dialogue. Personally, I like a lot of dialogue, so long as it's fresh and moves the story along, and it has to be well written and natural. A good way to test this is to read your dialogues scenes out loud, or have someone else read them to you. Hearing the word gives you a very different perspective. Stilted, awkward speech patterns become glaringly obvious in a way they just don't when you're reading them silently off the page.

There's an ongoing debate among writers and writing instructors about adverbs in dialogue tags. Ex: "Yes," Boris said brightly/sadly/angrily/softly/. Many argue that the setting, action and the actual dialogue should make such qualifiers unnecessary. I agree to some extent, but also hate the ping-pong effect of pages of "he said" then "she said" then "he said". "Said" is such a drab, boring, obvious little word. Clearly someone is speaking; the quotation marks tell us that.

If your characters have distinct voices of their own, you can sometimes do away with the whole "said" issue and just have the dialogue, especially if there are only two people talking. Manuel Puig did exactly that in Kiss of the Spider Woman. The majority of the novel is nothing but lines of dialogue between two men sharing a prison cell; no "he said" then "the other guy said" at all. This works because Puig gave middle-aged homosexual Molina and fiery young political prisoner Valentin such vividly distinct voices that the reader has no trouble telling them apart. That's an extreme example, and I'm not advocating you use it, but it's instructive to see how it works.

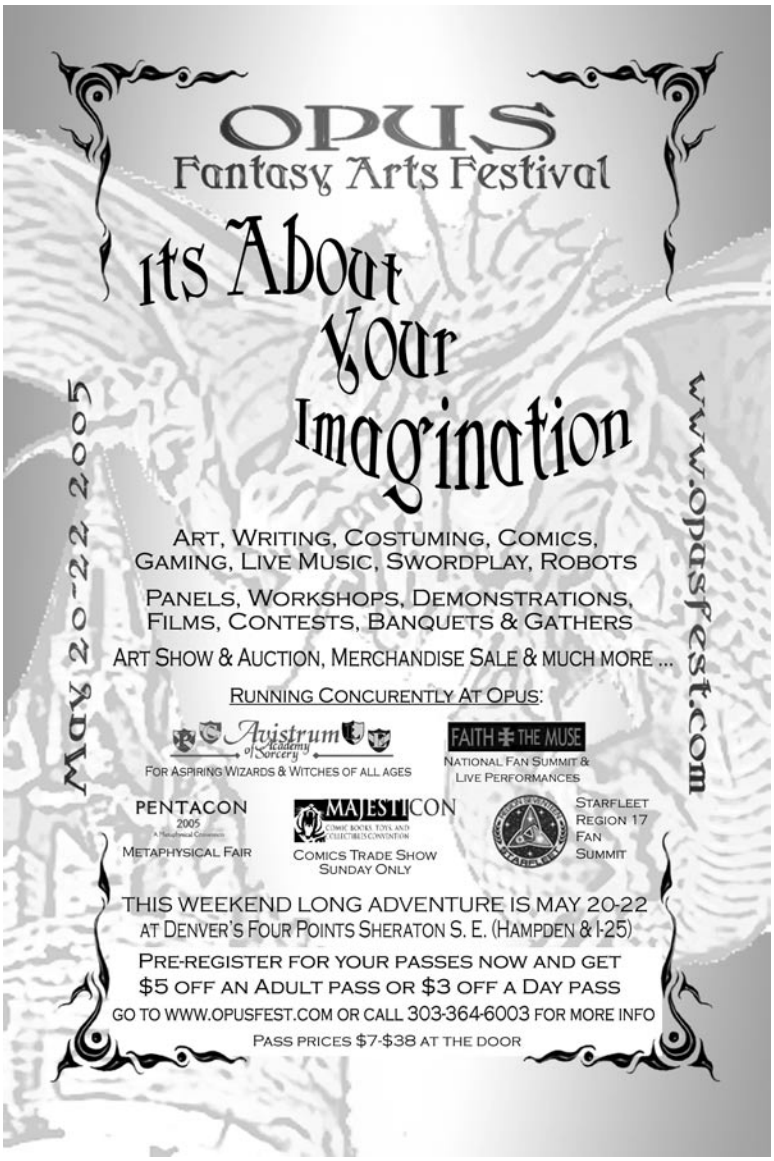
Flewelling's Sixth Law: We're not all British. It's very tempting to make your country peasants sound like bit players from Monty Python and the Holy Grail and the upper crust sound like escapees from the Royal Shakespeare Company. Why do so many fantasy characters in totally made up worlds sound like they hail from some part of the United Kingdom? (Probably

because most of us grew up reading Tolkien and Robin Hood and watching Brit made costume drama, actually.) Listen to your characters. Listen to your world. Look for the internal consistencies that will give each character a voice that suits their personality and place in their world.

One last comment on the whole "said" issue. There are a lot of words that mean said, but that have a unique connotation. Growled. Screamed. Sobbed. Whispered. Shouted. Hissed. I like those. They are descriptive and economical. "She sobbed" is so much tidier than "She said weepily." You get to knock out a whole word. Your editor will love you.

Ideally, you will mix and match all these methods, but the dialogue should stand strongly on its own.

There are, of course, no "laws" of character development, just tricks of the trade that come in handy. I've given you a few that I've found most useful, and you can discover more on your own. The more you write and find your own voice, the more naturally all this will come out on the page.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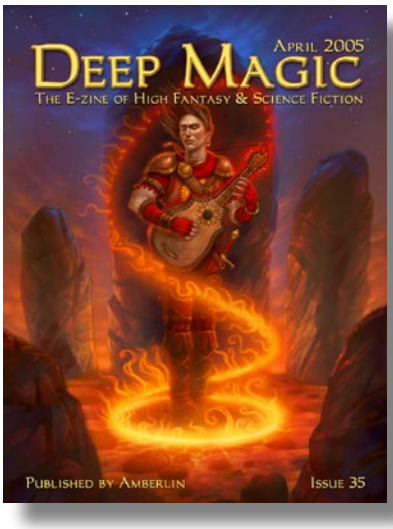
Featured Artist
Howard Lyon



Age: 31
Residence: Mesa, Arizona
Marital Status: Married
Children: 3 kids
Hobbies: Reading, studying history and sculpting
Personal Quote: "'For all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been'" - *John Greenleaf Whittier*
Favorite Book or Author: The Harry Potter Series
Started Painting In: 1986
Artist Most Inspired By: Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema
Media You Work In: Oils and Digital
Schools Attended: Brigham Young University, Mesa Community College
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Dragon Magazine, Various Wizards of the Coast Publications, Runelords: The Sum of All Men (Hardcover inside), various video game titles published by Midway, Nintendo, Interplay, Atari, Eidos and others, Spectrum 7 and 11, Exposé 2, d'artiste.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally? You can contact me through my website.
Website URL: www.howardlyon.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I remember always drawing from a very young age. When I was 12, I tried doing a drawing where you grid off the reference material and then draw a grid at the same proportion on your canvas or paper and use it as a guide. The image turned out quite well for my age and at that point, I remember deciding that I wanted to be an artist. My parents supported me wholeheartedly and signed me up for some drawing classes and then an oil painting class. There never seemed to be a question of what I wanted to do after that.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Hopefully, my work evokes a sense of the academic painting and traditions in art of the 19th century. I try to draw upon the way they compose and render, though I often apply a more contemporary palette.

continued on next page

My work is realistic, but not in the direction of photorealism. I try to render the materials and textures accurately, as well as the lighting, but not at the expense of my artistic goals for a particular painting.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: I find a lot of my inspiration in nature. Just a trip to the backyard, looking at the bark on a tree or the pattern in the clouds can trigger an idea for a creature or a composition. Beyond that, the internet has proven to be an invaluable tool. I have a huge collection of images to draw upon, as well as a great book collection. I can sit down at the computer or at my bookshelf and sift through hundreds of images and be inspired to attempt great and bold art—the trick is pulling it off. That part I am still working on!

Q: What inspired this piece (our cover art)? (Tell us its story...)
A: Paizo Publishing contacted me to do this piece for issue #314 of Dragon Magazine. The piece called for a bard casting a powerful fire spell. The bard himself was to have fire imagery worked into the costume as well. The painting was a definite challenge. I wanted to capture the fire imagery, but at the same time I wanted to have serenity in the piece. I tried to capture an expression of deep concentration and focus in the bard's face, and I used a graceful s-curve for the path of the fire. Given the nature of the spell, it made sense to have the notes start out as notes and turn into little balls of flame as they made their way down and around to the ground.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: I am definitely most influenced by the art of the 19th century, and then I would say I jump back to the 15th and 16th centuries. In the 19th, I look to Leighton, Bouguereau, Tadema and Waterhouse. Before them, Michelangelo continues to increase his influence over me as I have read more about his life and spent more time studying his drawings and sculpture. The grace and color of Raphael has also become a focus of mine lately. He seemed to strike that wonderful balance between the real and the fantasy, creating scenes and figures that stretched beyond what nature has to offer. As for contemporary artists, I look to Arnold Friberg, Scott Gustafson, Brom, Jon Foster and the art for the many great movies of our time, including the Star Wars Series, Lord of the Rings, Labyrinth and the Dark Crystal.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: I ran my own company for a while with my brother and some good friends. It was called Professor Fog's

continued on next page

Workshop. We decided that we would focus on kids' games. Two of the products that we made, *Wizmo's Workshop* and *Max and Beeboo: Monster Math,* stand at the top of my list right now as personal achievements. I felt that they were the culmination of the years that I spent working the game industry, and that I put everything I had into the games. Some screen shots can be found on my website in the 3D section and some of the designs in the Drawings section.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: It seems that there is a much broader base of quality fantasy and sci-fi art. Thirty years ago there were a few artists that really stood above the rest. Today, there are many artists who look to the paintings of the great masters and aspire to paint on the same level. Aiming high like that has brought the whole genre to a new level. Many of the great paintings of the past were fantasy paintings. Look at all the great mythological paintings of the last few centuries and I believe that is what we have ahead of us. At some point in the early 20th century, the esteem placed upon classically realistic painting, including fantasy art, was denigrated and called kitsch. Illustration became, in the eyes of the fine art world, a second rate form of art. I believe that this trend is reversing, not only in fantasy art, but in the fine-art world. We are starting to see more and more fantasy art making its way into galleries and taking back its long established place among the fine arts. We aren't yet back to where it was more than a century ago, but we are getting closer.

IMPO 1
By JT Slane

"Of all the machines in a semiconductor fab, this one can kill you in the most ways. Looks like a giant bread oven, doesn't it? But it's not heat that'll kill you."

James yawned and craned his neck to see the top of the brute – the Axtrius 1000, or A-1000. It was huge, probably the size of two Chevy Suburbans fused together. Or a small mobile home. The Emergency Response Team leader's eyes grinned. After two years in the wafer fab, James could tell someone's expression by their eyes alone, for most wore a mouth cover or spit shield along with a gortex hood or Dryden helmet. The eyes said it all. They could tell when a technician was lying, angry, or bemused.

"Not heat, Stamos? This thing is high voltage?"

The grin widened. Stamos was a little shorter than James but much wider across the shoulders. He was an equipment tech, one of the best in the fab, and had earned his position as ERT leader by the way he had handled a gas leak evacuation in the Thin Films area. He swept his arm around and cocked his thumb.

"High voltage? Oh, you bet. The highest voltage. Hold on and let me fetch Wolfe and Tam." Stamos walked around the side and hollered over the noise of a suction vacuum, "Hey, you guys crawling around in there? New sup is here. C'mon out."

The vacuum sound ended. James looked around the corner of the hulking machine. The side door panel was open and he watched the two equipment techs crawl out from within a small silver chamber. Tam was short, Wolfe a bit heavyset. James didn't know how they both fit inside the beast.

James watched Tam duck back into the silver chamber and let his curiosity get the better of him. He had to duck to enter, but it was roomier than he had expected. The walls were shined to a mirror finish.

"Wolfe and Tam, this is James Shuler, the new Implant sup."

Even after two years, James hated the designation. The techs liked to pronounce it *soup*.

Wolfe nodded, eye protection shielding his expression. "Can't shake, James. Got enough particles as it is."

Tam, the short one, inclined his head. "Welcome to Implant. You showing him the emergency stuff, Stamos?"

"I was hoping you would, Tam. I only know Thin Films. These Implant tools are baby stuff anyway."

"Baby stuff," Tam said with a grunt. "You know anything about Implanters?" he said, turning to James.

James shrugged. "Only a little. I didn't know they were so big."

"Biggest toolsets in the fab," Wolfe said proudly.

"They'll kill ya though. Did you hear about Dante?"

James hadn't.

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A Midwinter-Night's Nightmare
By Jean Meyer

The snow was really coming down. So far that evening it had buried the car, the cats, the cows, and the corn. And by morning, we'd probably be missing our neighbors, the Canes.

"Do you think if we ignore it, it will go away?" I asked hopefully.

My husband looked up from reading his latest sci-fi novel and said, "It never worked with the kids. What makes you think it will work with the weather?" He put his book down. "I think I'm ready for a long winter's nap. You coming?"

So we turned a cold shoulder to old man winter and crawled into bed. My husband was snoring before his head hit the pillow, and I was just about to drift off when a pillar of golden light filled our bedroom. Down came a glittering carriage and hovered over the bed. Out jumped a little man who introduced himself as Doc, one of the seven dwarves.

"Please, Miss Jean," he implored, "come with me to the Enchanted Forest. There has been an unfortunate incident and your assistance would be most welcome."

Well now, I wasn't so sure. After all, I don't make a habit of running off in the middle of the night with every strange little man that comes along.

Oh, okay . . . so maybe I do. But this time, I was going to find out a thing or two."

I told Doc, "Before I decide whether to go with you or not, you must answer me one very important question."

"Gladly," he replied.

"Now think carefully before you answer," I instructed.

"I will," he promised.

"In this Enchanted Forest . . . is there *snow*?"

"No."

"I'LL GO!"

Doc, obviously quite used to the effect Prince Charming had on females, was prepared. He popped my eyes back in their sockets, wiped the drool from my chin, closed my gaping mouth, and said to the prince, "She's charmed to meet you."

* * *

In a small clearing in the Enchanted Forest huddled an odd assortment of characters.

"Introductions are in order," Doc said as we drew near. "Let's start here on the left. This dashing young fellow is Prince Charming."

Prince Charming shook off the four lovely ladies that had been hanging from his neck and arms, and stepped forward.

I gawked. This guy was gorgeous. He took my hand in his and pressed it to his lips.

"My heart's immortal thirst has been satisfied by your captivating beauty," he said.

I was speechless, which in retrospect was probably a good thing.

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Announcing two new Amberlin Books releases! *Silverkin*, sequel to *Landmoor*, is written by Jeff Wheeler and completes the Landmoor Duology. *Deeper Magic: The Second Collection* contains selected short stories from our second year of publication. Both books are available through Amazon.com and other online retailers. Click the cover images to order.

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Silverkin

The anticipated sequel to Landmoor has finally arrived, continuing the adventures of Thealos Quickfellow.

Deeper Magic:

The next collection of short stories compiled from the second year of Deep Magic.

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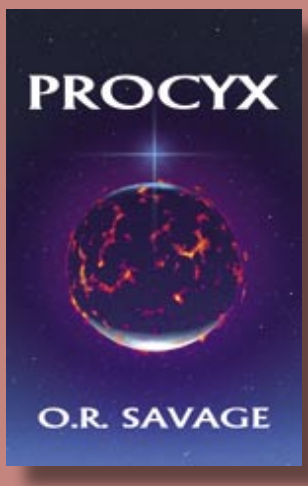

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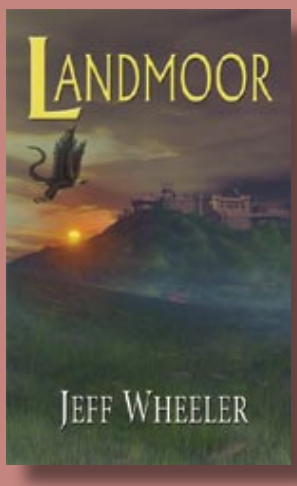

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ISBN: 1586490028

AMBERLIN BOOKS

Shadowloom

By Mark Reeder

Many thanks to Jim Reed for the invaluable help in figuring out the physics behind shadow weaving. And thanks to the writers at the Online Writers Workshop, especially Malcolm, JW, and M, for their critiques of the manuscript

For Debbie Kranzler, always.
May you continue to push back shadows and light the passage to the other side.

Chapter One

Dark, numbing mists swirled, parted briefly. I heard the cries of sea birds mixed with the sound of water hissing against sand. The mists drew closed again, but I fought them and managed to rise out of the blackness.

Slowly, the rest of my senses returned. The air smelled of pitch and hemp and seaweed. I opened my eyes and saw white fingers of ocean foam skimming toward me. Beyond the water's edge a brilliant moon lanced the night sky, and beneath it lay a harbor filled with sailing ships, riding easily on a dusky wine sea.

I recognized the vessels as galleons—heavy merchant ships used by the Spanish in the Sixteenth century.

Where on Earth was I?

Sweat beaded my brow; my pulse hammered. The dark mists beckoned agreeably once more. But something savage within me rebelled and I quashed my panic.

After a few minutes, I breathed easily again.

I tried to sit up and couldn't. My arms were bound behind my back and my legs were equally restricted. Judging by the numbness in my hands and feet, I had been tied up for quite some time.

Bits and pieces of memory came back then. I recalled fleeing for my life. Something heavy struck me and I fell, stunned or knocked unconscious. The next thing, someone was pulling me from burning wreckage.

Bits and pieces of memory came back then. I recalled fleeing for my life. Something heavy struck me and I fell, stunned or knocked unconscious. The next thing, someone was pulling me from burning wreckage. I wanted to thank whoever, but I didn't get the chance, for it seemed I was falling through a quilted sky the color of Chagall's "Man in Blue." Yellow-orange sun above. Patchwork earth of farm fields and forest below. I passed out again. And I awoke on this beach.

The rising tide surged toward me and an errant wave soaked my shirt. I rolled away and came up against a sea wall. So much for escape. So much for the kindness of strangers too, I

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

The Subtle Knife
by Philip Pullman

The sequel to Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass,* book two of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, begins in our world, in modern-day Oxford in England with its cell phones and electricity. It introduces the character Will Parry, a boy the same age as Lyra, the heroine of the series. He lives with his mother who suffers from a mental illness. Their lives have been invaded by strange men who continually ransack their home looking for some papers left behind by Will's father. After Will escapes with the papers, he begins wandering and looking for a place to sleep. He ends up falling through a rift in the universe that leads him to the dead world of Citágazze, a world where only the children are safe from the menacing Specters who feed on adults.

Young Lyra meets Will in Citágazze where they form a distrusting partnership. Lyra wants to find a scholar in our Oxford from whom she can learn the truth about Dust. Will is determined to hunt down his missing father. Lyra's alethiometer can help her with both their quests. But her questions to a desperate physicist rouse suspicion as to who she is and how Dust is behind a mystery of religion that has plagued all of the interconnected worlds. Her carelessness results in the loss of her precious alethiometer, cutting her off from the strange insights it has been giving her. To gain it back, Lyra and Will must seek the Subtle Knife, a creation lost within Citágazze, that can slice open portals between worlds. But claiming it costs a dreadful price to the bearer. And Lyra's greatest enemy, Mrs. Coulter and her cruel golden-monkey daemon, have not given up the search for the missing girl.

Will and Lyra begin to learn that Lord Asriel's ambitions, first hinted at in the first book, run deeper than anyone had ever suspected. Not only does he seek to defy the power of the church in his world, he seeks to defy the power of the Authority himself, sparking a second revolution in heaven that will be even more devastating than the initial one. To be victorious, he needs the Subtle Knife. And it seems that destiny has played both Will and Lyra into his hands.

The Subtle Knife is a brilliant sequel that fulfills the high expectations set by its predecessor. The tale is rich and multi-layered, the various world-settings vibrant and compelling and dark with foreboding. Favorite characters from book one make crucial appearances in book two, and new characters are introduced with deftness and creativity. Pullman is a master of creating danger and peril for his characters. And the compassion and subtlety he uses is as sharp as his magical knife. The tension in the storyline continually ratchets up throughout the novel as Lyra's and Will's destinies begin to be foreshadowed.

Possible Objectionable Material: none

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler.)

Book Review: Fantasy

Freedom's Gate
by Naomi Kritzer

Freedom's Gate is a change from the usual epic quest fantasy. Well-developed characters and world are its

continued on next page

strong points; details and internal plot are not.

At the edge of civilization, walled "Greek" cities border a desert steppe roamed by nomads and bandits. Magic depends on the capture of wild spirits, djinn. Kyros, the military commander of Elpisia, employs our heroine, Lauria, to track down runaway slaves when she isn't busy spying. He sends her on a mission to pose as a runaway and infiltrate a bandit tribe. To make her story believable, she must first masquerade as a new concubine in the household of another Greek, where she is raped. There, and upon reaching the bandits and trying to gain acceptance into a warrior sisterhood, she comes to sympathize with the slaves and question her loyalty to Kyros and the Greeks. The theme of slavery runs through the novel, from the lives of the slaves of the Greeks to the magic system: sorceresses enslave djinni, which must do as told by the holders of their spell chains but, as much as possible, subvert commands while keeping to the literal wording.

The world-building, while broadly well done, failed in many little details, particularly heaps of anachronisms. I would not be able to call them so had the author not insisted on setting the story in an alternate historical past rather than changing some names and calling it fairyland. (So sorcerers bother me less than stirrups.) These mistakes, combined with a couple of continuity errors and overuse of the phrase "too keyed up to sleep," contributed to a generally sloppy impression and hurt this reader's trust in the author (or editor). That, of course, doesn't cover everything the author did right, and many details of nomad life did ring true.

Kritzer also turns Lauria and several other characters into engaging people with families, pasts, and lives. However, Lauria's progression from tracking down runaways to helping them was too predictable and too easy. Once with the bandits, she was out of reach of the Greeks, and so little prevented her from changing sides. Another problem is that our sympathies switch over to the slaves almost immediately, and the more gradual progression of Lauria's emotions was not fleshed out well enough to prevent one from feeling jolted when reminded that she hadn't yet come around to our point of view. Her realization that the Greeks had used her as a tool rather than a person was better done.

The problems with *Freedom's Gate* are mostly of the sort that can be overcome by care or practice. I look forward to Kritzer's further efforts.

Possible objectionable material: graphic rape, some violence.

(Reviewed by Ida Clinkscales)

Book Review: Fantasy
The Chalice and the Blade
by Glenna McReynolds

The month is October, the year 1183. Set in Merioneth, Wales, *The Chalice and the Blade* opens in the underground caverns beneath Carn Merioneth. As Rhiannon, a druid priestess, prepares to perform the annual rites of sacrifice, her mind is not on the impending arrival of the dragon wyrms to receive their due, as much as it is on the threat posed to her and her children by the two people she once trusted most.

Betrayal, when it comes, does not take her wholly by surprise. Yet she was not entirely prepared for the venue by which it came...

Fifteen years later, Ceridwen Ab Arawn, a beautiful girl raised in a convent, is informed that she is to be the bride of the Boar of Balour. The Boar is a rich and powerful lord, renowned for both his sadism and his deviant sexual practices. Ceridwen is horrified to learn that she has no choice in the matter, and is sent to him under heavy guard. When she tries to escape, she is caught by a knight and but for the intervention of Dain, a magician feared for his incredible power, she would have been worse than dead.

Dain, it seems, is an old friend to the Boar—or is he?

There are many questions surrounding Dain, not the least of which are his strange involvement with the Boar during the Crusades and his current plans regarding Ceridwen. A handsome magician with great power, and seemingly little faith, Dain is much more than he appears.

When Ceridwen's guard, Morgan, returns to collect her, he too seems to be in some way connected with

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Dain and the Boar. As more and more startling evidence of her past comes to light, Ceridwen begins to wonder whether she was intended to be a bride at all—or if her fate lay with the precious druid's blood flowing in her veins, blood someone wants spilled, in an effort to call upon the forgotten magic of a distant time, for strange and frightening purposes. Is there no one Ceridwen can trust?

In *The Chalice and the Blade*, first-time author Glenna McReynolds presents us with a world as familiar as it is strange. Ceridwen, Dain, Rhuddlan, and Morgan all live and breathe in her pages. I was swept away by the Tylwyth Teg, also known as Quicken-Tree, as much as I unconsciously found myself accepting their existence as a matter of course. McReynolds brings the elfin people to life with a sheer magic reminiscent of Tolkien, though her elves bear little similarity to his.

There are many stories within the story; from the tragedy of Rhiannon; to the mystery surrounding Ceridwen's brother, Mychael. McReynolds weaves these various stories together into one complex, and fascinating plot; its many twists and turns are craftily written, never confusing, never disappointing the reader.

A good, solid read, this is an enduring romance, which will stay with you long after you've finished the last page.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Deborah Pindler)

Book Review: Fantasy

Chronicles of the Planeswalkers, Part Zero

by B. T. Robertson

Aerinas, heir to Tristandor, Elf-Lord of Mynandrias, is unhappy with his role. Longing for travel and adventure, he resents his overprotected status. The forbidden fortress of El-Caras provides his opening challenge. This initial scene of *The Chronicles of the Planeswalkers* reveals to what lengths a restless youth will go to satisfy his dreams. In this novel, B. T. Robertson's first published fantasy, Aerinas progresses through a series of trials with death, in various villainous guises, snapping at his heels. Along the way, the elfin musician-turned-warrior finds strength and compassion amid companions fated to join him in defense of their plane of Vaalüna. More of this mission will be revealed in later books.

Sprites of the Hollow Wood are the Krayn elf's first saviors, helping him survive a direwolf attack. Next to aid Aerinas, the healing wizard, Aeligon, and his odd conjuror apprentice, Pux, provide both a healthy dose of common sense and comic relief. The humorous history of Aeligon's association with Pux contrasts with the unhealthy one between the foul, ambitious Sorcerer Haarath and his fearful servant, Benafor. The shape-shifting Spirit Folk, led by the Lady Seer, Krüna, lure and test Aerinas to prove him worthy of his calling. As champion of his plane, he must lead the good fight against the evil spawn of the Nether. Including goblins, direwolves and insectoid Cray, these evil spawn are ruled by the Warlock Hydrais (or Calaridis, an incarnation of the Dark Lord Wrantha), thought defeated in the Great War. Hydrais' Mirror, once sealed by Aeligon's magic within the ruins of El-Caras, makes those like Haarath his tools by letting them glimpse other, less wholesome planes.

King Hrathis and his giant allies, led by the mighty Farrin, are introduced in a back story, and then become a major factor in Aerinas' quest, as do a select group of his Krayn friends, including his lordly father. Aerinas, who also reflects his mother Nimoni's high-strung artistic temperament, does not accept his father's inclusion with good grace. He is closer to his father's horse, Jjnasi, his roc ally, Wesnoc, and the Krayn maiden-warrior, Ithyllna.

Peripheral, yet key, to the story is the stolen Elfstone, Sheevos, in which the Light resides. Mortwar, a talented tracker hired to recover the Elfstone, must pit his skills against Hydrais' hireling, Callaway, in the disreputable port city of Drameda. Robertson is at his best in describing the tavern and wharf settings. His oft-abused passive voice and third person omniscient point of view actually work in these scenes, and make for an enjoyable read. Quite at home with dialog elsewhere in

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the text, he shines here, particularly in dealing with the rival ships Demovon and Arünir, and their crews.

I recommend seeking out the second edition of *Part Zero*; it far exceeds the first edition, which had only the excellent artwork to commend it.

Possible objectionable material: none.

Reviewed by Anne M. Stickel

Book Review: Fantasy

Lords of Swords
edited by Daniel E. Blackston

Recently, as far as short fiction goes, adventurous tales full of steel-clashing battles, mighty heroes, and ferocious monsters haven't been popular—most of the major magazines publish primarily science fiction of some stripe, and when they do go for fantasy, or at least fantastic elements, the stories tend to be urban fantasy, magical realism, or just plain "weird." (Happily, *Deep Magic*, with its focus on high fantasy and openness to sword and sorcery and space opera, is an exception to this rule.) Enter Pitch-Black Books, with its first anthology, *Lords of Swords*. Contained within are thirteen stories which encourage sword fights and high adventure rather than ostracize them.

The book itself is wonderfully produced, with high-quality paper and cover stock, a black-and-white illustration by Loren Malloy for every story, and a great layout and design. *Lords of Swords* is easy and fun reading from its physical qualities alone. As with just about any anthology, I didn't like all the stories, but the overall product was well worth my money and time. Here are my thoughts on a few of the stories:

"Vali's Wound" by Conan novelist John C. Hocking was the shortest story in the book, but by no means the least. Brand is a Viking warrior who, when a Valkyrie comes to claim the soul of his wounded friend, Vali, confronts her and refuses to allow her to take it. She agrees to spare Vali, but demands something from Brand in return. This story had an excellent Norse atmosphere and imagery, and the mythology involved was convincing.

"Line of Blood" by Howard Andrew Jones is an excellent example of the sort of imaginative-adventure fantasy which is all too rare in the short-story form. Raas, a salvager who works in a land covered by seas of sorcerous mist, and her reptilian sidekick Jekka are hired by the Tyryan of Mekkara for an unusual job involving an ancient crypt and a mysterious succession rite. This is one of the anthology's best stories, with imagination, action, and character aplenty.

"The Slaying of Winter" by Vera Nazarian was one of the stories which didn't really do it for me. The hero is Iliss, a warrior woman whose tribe was horribly wronged by northern barbarians. She has now set out to slay the barbarians' god, Trei. The story is beautifully written, but I found the protagonist and the situations she finds herself in overly unpleasant. The ending fell a little flat for me, too.

"Iron Hands" by new writer Ray Kane is almost certainly the most colorful story I've read. It concerns a veteran farmer who has his hands cut off for failure to pay taxes to the evil Moon King. However, a sorcerer blesses him with a pair of deadly iron hands, and he finds himself a leader to the revolution against the Moon King. This was another excellent story, and really impressed me for the amount of sheer imagination it crams into a few short pages.

Overall, Lords of Swords was an excellent collection of solid adventure fantasy, with a mix of new, semi-pro, and pro authors—there's a full-length story by Tanith Lee, and another piece by E.E. Knight, the author of the Vampire Earth novels.

If you enjoy a lot of heroism, adventure, and battle in your fantasy, *Lords of Swords* is highly recommended.

Possible objectionable material: All the stories feature a good deal of violence which is sometimes fairly bloody; there are some sexual references (nothing explicit or "on-screen"); and one story involves a sentient sword who appears to its owner as a woman for sexual encounters.

(Reviewed by Sean T.M. Stiennon.)

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terror in an opponent, to turn his bowels to water, and slacken both his resolve and his muscles. But familiarity breeds contempt, they say, and we were well familiar with this sound, my brave few hundred and I. Copper highlights glinted from conical helms and moulded breastplates as the nomadic tribesmen brought their anger and their steel to brush the last of the invaders from their lands. As the wailing men in their short leather kilts with their wickedly curved scimitars halted at the foot of the walls, and the makeshift scaling ladders began to slap against the stone, I straightened.

With a sigh of resignation I slid the ivory hilted rapier into my bloodstained hand and waited for the first of them to breast the wall. It could not last much longer. We were tired and few and we could not throw them back forever. Already we had held for three days, and in my heart I knew that we would not see another nightfall. These hard-eyed, dark-skinned men of the desert would continue to scale our walls in numbers we could not repel. Then we would be forced to fall back to the courtyard to die in a shrinking circle of steel. Such a senseless waste.

* * *

Eight thousand men had crossed the border into Dal-Purai lands. At their head was a man bent on the glory of conquest. The desert lands were by ancient right ours, he claimed. Thus, it was our God given duty to take them back. Never mind that we had enough land already, or that none but the nomadic tribesmen could survive in the shifting sands with their burning days and icy nights. Against all advice and argument, the King left behind him a land stripped of most of its fighting men, his eyes set firmly on the distant horizon. Most of our men had little desire for the campaign, and as we marched deeper into the sands, desertions became ever more frequent. By the time we fought the final battle, somewhere in the region of a thousand men had slipped away in the dark hours. I thanked the stars for their good sense, for they at least would return home to their families and loved ones.

We saw little of the Dal-Purai as we forged forward. For the most part, they were content to let the sun and the sand fight their war for them, the hammer and anvil of their vengeance. Men chose to cast aside their armour rather than roast inside it, and our path became littered with discarded metal. Occasionally bands of desert warriors would appear in our way, drawing us into skirmishes before melting away among the dunes. It was clear that they were leading us on, sapping our strength, luring us ever forward. Clear to all but the King. He was convinced of their weakness, their cowardice. "They have no stomach for battle. We must follow them. We'll hound them until they have no choice but to face our power. Then we will crush them."

No counsel could sway him or turn aside his course. Many tried, myself included. All failed. Some, more voluble than others, were executed for treason. The arguments ceased and the whisperings began. The King must be removed, those whispers said, else his madness dooms us all. Yet it was too late for that, for by then, doom had already found us.

Like a teasing maiden with her skirts lifted about her knees, the Dal-Purai had led us a merry chase. Then, with our army tired and dispirited, they had attacked. At the height of the day with the blazing sun at its worst, thousands of screaming tribesmen threw themselves upon us. The cavalry that might have made the difference between victory and defeat were useless, horses struggling through soft, drifting sands. Of the battle itself, I remember little save a confusion of images. Horses reared, throwing their riders. Curved swords slashed the air, blood spraying. The King fell, broadsword cleaving at the mass of men around him. The noise of battle was a confusing symphony of screams and curses, the percussion of swords. It was all so sudden.

I remember thinking that they had appeared with all the lethal swiftness of a sandstorm. And then a ringing clash sounded against my helmet and darkness descended.

I had been one of the lucky ones. I had fallen among friends in an area of the battlefield where the enemy were less numerous. Discipline had held there, and a small knot of men had managed to fight their way free of the ensuing massacre. These things I had learned when I woke. We were all that remained; some five hundred men and twenty horses. Five hundred men looking to me for guidance and leadership.

* * *

As the first attacker breasted the wall to find the point of my rapier at his throat, I wondered if they might have fared better under another's leadership. Grabbing the dying soldier, I shoved him back down the ladder, his bulk dislodging other climbers. Glancing quickly around, I could see that my men were struggling to hold their own. There were barely fifty defenders on each of the four walls now, with perhaps twenty more in the courtyard below in various states of injury. To my left a man screamed, clutched at his stomach, and fell backwards from the battlement. His killer scrambled over the wall, swiftly followed by two more men. Leaving others to deal with those climbing toward me, I turned my attention to those already inside our defences. Racing toward them, I ducked under a slashing stroke that would have separated head from shoulders, dropped my left shoulder and slammed it hard into the midriff of the first warrior. He crashed to the stones below, flailing wildly, joining his victim in a crumpled heap. Dropping to my knees, I rammed the point of the rapier forward, spearing the second warrior's groin. As I dragged the blade free, I was horribly aware of the vulnerability of my position. The wounded tribesman dropped his scimitar and sank back against the battlement, both hands desperately trying to stem the flow of blood.

This left the third man facing me, my back exposed to any others scaling the ladder. Forcing that fear from my mind, I advanced, stepping over the dying man, rapier flicking forward like the questing tongue of a snake. The rapier has a long, narrow blade, and as I turned aside wild slashes from the broad-bladed scimitar, my greatest fear was that the slender steel would snap, leaving me helpless. Locking my eyes to those of the Dal-Purai, I grinned at him in what I hoped looked like grim confidence as I danced forward.

The ploy must have worked, for as I forced him steadily back, his own eyes widened in fear, and his strokes became ever more desperate. As he pulled his arm back for another slash, I seized my opportunity and stabbed forward, all my weight behind the straight blade. He screamed as the point struck his forearm, steel sliding between the bones, and the scimitar flying from nerveless fingers. The ivory hilt was wrenched from my grasp. He, too, toppled from the narrow battlement, leaving me weaponless. Fortunately there were no more enemies to take advantage of the moment. Once again my heroic defenders had held, and the Dal-Purai had fallen back. Bodies littered the walls and courtyard, most still in death, some writhing in agony. The majority were tribesmen, but enough wore the tattered uniform of the Kingdom that I doubted we could hold another assault. The final act of this tragedy was about to be played out.

* * *

We tended to the wounded and I recovered my rapier from the fallen body, our force spread ever more thinly around the walls. My gaze travelled northwest to the rising hills

marking the border. Half a day's march away. So close, and yet so far beyond our reach. We had been so near that we could almost smell the grass of home when the first of the Dal-Purai had jogged into view above the shimmering horizon. A sigh of despair had rippled through my men when they realized there would be no escape after all. Six horses were all that remained by that time. The rest we had butchered, for they were the only food we had. I had hoped to save them all, those ragged survivors, but the best I could achieve was to send six men home. As they had ridden away, the rest of us had taken shelter in the ancient adobe fort that would now become our tomb.

In many ways the first day had been the worst. The tribesmen had travelled fast to catch us, which meant they had no siege equipment with them. They could have simply camped around the fort, waiting for starvation to either kill us or drive us to attack, but that was not their way. Like a small boy armed with a stick, we had stirred the hornet's nest. Now the hornets buzzed around us, eager for revenge. While ladders were hastily constructed, the bulk of their army had drawn itself about our walls and proceeded to taunt us. In an ear numbing percussion, the blades of scimitars had rattled against shields, punctuated by the awful howl. Hour after sun-drenched hour they had maintained the nerve jangling assault, and I could see the morale of my men dwindling. I had not even realized that I was singing aloud until the men around me began to join in. It was a simple soldier's song, and by the time I reached the second verse every man on the southern wall had begun to sing.

"I set my feet to the marching beat
And follow the trumpet's call.
Take up my sword and follow my Lord
To be a Kingdom soldier."

The tune had caught quickly, drowned at first by the primal power of the Dal-Purai chant, but swelling as more men took up the song. By the time we had reached the chorus, five hundred throats were bellowing defiance.

"Kingdom soldiers stand your ground,
Fear not the battle's sound.
With your comrades all around,
You will steady be."

We had ended the song with a roar that shook the walls and silenced the Dal-Purai. After that there had been no more taunts, only relentless attacks by warriors determined to crush our audacity.

* * *

There was no singing now. Bodies sapped of energy, and throats scorched dry by the heat and dust, we simply waited in silence for the next attack, knowing that it would be the last. When it came, the assault was launched from all sides. The enemy intended to sweep us aside in a flood of bodies. As the screaming horde charged again, and the ladders began to rattle against the walls, there was time for one last look around. A hard knot sat in my stomach, the fear of approaching death. With it came a sense of despair and failure. These men should not have to

die here. Their courage and valour had been wasted, thrown away on a worthless cause. I had failed them, and the knowledge was hard to bear. My eyes wandered to the northwest again, for one last look at the distant skies of home. They were met by a sight that for a moment rekindled the dying flame of hope. Against the backdrop of the hills, a cloud approached us. A cloud of dust that, for a few crazy seconds, I took to be a sandstorm. I prayed for it to be a sandstorm, a swirling cloak of choking, blinding sand to fill our enemy's eyes and let us slip away. A foolish thought. Sandstorms blow out of the desert, not into it.

Only two other things could cause a cloud like that, marching men or horses. It was moving too quickly to be men on foot, so that left only one possibility. It was a possibility that brought with it horror. The knot in my stomach dissolved, leaving behind a watery dread. Fear disappeared, forced aside by a surge of anger so sudden and unexpected that my feet had taken me half-way to the northwest corner of the battlements before I even realised I had moved. That anger found focus as the first of the new attackers rose into view above the wall. The rapier, as I have said, is a narrow bladed thrusting weapon, not forged or designed for slashing attacks. This consideration meant nothing to me as I swept the blade around, two-handed, toward the screaming face. I hardly even registered the shock of impact as I continued along the wall, the headless body toppling lazily backward.

The dust cloud was closer now, individual riders visible before it. They rode beneath a trailing banner. The insignia on that banner was not clear to the eye, yet, but I knew it. Just as I knew that there would be six hundred riders following it. I watched as they drew closer, forcing the anger aside, trying to think. My men were hard pressed now, fighting like demons to keep the walls clear. These riders could save us; the Dal-Purai do not like cavalry. But they would have to strike quickly to avoid becoming enmeshed by the greater numbers. That would mean that we would have to open the gates, take the fight outside. Such a tactic would require great timing and no small amount of luck. There was little chance of it succeeding, but of course, no choice.

I yelled at my men to fall back to the gates, and so we relinquished the walls we had fought so hard to keep. We retreated quickly, forming a tight cordon about the gates. It took the Dal-Purai precious moments to realise what was happening as they flooded over the suddenly undefended battlements. Those seconds unfolded as they raced down uncontested stairs to form ranks in the courtyard. Then the moment I had been waiting for arrived. The noise of battle changed. Above cries of alarm and surprise came the thunder of hooves, punctuated by the strident blast of a war trumpet. I ordered the gates opened, watching as horses stormed past, forcing the enemy away from the south wall. Those not quick enough were trampled. As the dust of the charge swirled through the open gates, I urged my men outside. Only speed would save us in the confused moments before the Dal-Purai recovered from their shock. With nine men I stood in the gateway while those inside the fort moved toward us.

As the dust began to settle, I could see more horses charging forward, their banner flowing like a serpent, giving the impression that the black fox upon its red backdrop was in motion. I had been told that these were the best horsemen ever assembled, and watching them ride, I could see it had been no empty boast.

The first wave thundered away to safety, their part played. Half of those remaining rode full tilt along the face of the Dal-Purai army. Riding parallel with the fort's southern wall, they created a channel along which the last group of horsemen rode. Casting aside swords and shields, my remaining men were hauled astride sweat-stained, snorting horses, and spurred to safety. Still, there was danger. Horses milled around, jostling against each other as men

struggled onto their backs. The second charge had carried past now and the desert warriors, seeing their enemy escape, were charging forward again, courage restored. Those inside the fort were at the gates and we could not hold them. We cut down the first few to reach us, and then, as men began to fall, we turned and ran. Horses crashed into those pursuing us, stalling the charging warriors for vital seconds. Hooves flailed, causing panic and injury, as some of the beasts were cut from under their riders.

The noose began to tighten around our necks again, but I forgot the sounds of battle and turned my eyes from the carnage. Before me stamped a warhorse so white he was almost blinding. His name was Gauntlet, and astride his broad back sat the leader of these peerless riders. Grasping the offered hand, I vaulted aboard the impatient horse. I slipped my arms around the slender waist as Gauntlet was spurred into explosive motion. The ivory hilted rapier, a gift from my father, lay forgotten by the gates as we raced away, kicking aside grasping hands and snarling faces. We were almost clear when the sweet sound of Talmyra's voice flew over her shoulder. "I thought you said you would return."

"And you swore that you would wait for me."

The first time I set eyes on the mercenary Talmyra, she was seated tall on Gauntlet's back, the sun streaming through her hair in a burning halo. My heart had been hers from that moment on, against tradition, propriety or any other argument life could set against love. A prince of the realm was not supposed to set his sights on one so far below his station. The fact that she would dare to set her will against a king, deny his wishes, and outright disobey him did not exactly help matters either. When he announced his intention to invade Dal-Purai lands, my father had ordered Talmyra to lead his cavalry. Her refusal, stating that her contract was to train his horsemen, not fight pointless and irresponsible wars for him, had led to anger and dismissal. What he had not expected was that when she left, those she had trained, the same six hundred who now plucked us to safety, would choose to desert their King and ride with her.

Now, as Gauntlet lengthened his stride, I could see that most of the riders had galloped to safety. Some had not been so lucky; perhaps forty or more riderless horses trotted aimlessly about while a dozen others lay still or twitching on the hard packed sand. It was a small joy to me that out of this great tragedy at least some of my five hundred men would live to see their homeland again. A greater joy by far was to be reunited with Talmyra. That particular joy was short lived. We were almost clear when disaster struck. A small knot of men stood between us and freedom. They were yelling and waving their arms wildly in an attempt to frighten the galloping white stallion, or force his rider to rein him in. There was little chance of either. Talmyra urged him on, and Gauntlet flattened his ears, no hesitation in his stride. All but three of the tribesmen scattered aside, pigeons fluttering away from the hawk's dive.

Those three were ridden down, smashed like saplings in the path of a storm, but they served their purpose. The great horse gave a shudder as he passed through the group, stumbled a little, and then staggered on. Looking down I could see that the once pristine flanks were now stained the angry red of a desert sunset. He struggled gamely for a few more steps before the ragged wound in his throat brought him down. His head shook skyward and he snorted, a fine mist of blood spraying the air, before he crashed to the ground, legs kicking feebly as the life drained out of him. I leapt clear as Gauntlet rolled, no stirrups to hinder me. Talmyra was not so fortunate. She lay winded, right leg trapped beneath the solid weight of the dead stallion. A triumphant roar challenged the sky as the Dal-Purai surged towards us.

There could be no escape for us now, no further hope of rescue. I knelt at Talmyra's side, my hand sliding towards her sword, preparing to fight to my last breath for her. My fingers

never closed on that hilt. Her own hands grasped mine and held it tight as she spoke. "No more fighting, my love; no more killing. If we are to die here, let me at least taste one last kiss. Let me die with your hand stroking my hair one last time. One last caress."

She was right, I knew. If death was to claim us, what better place to find us than in each other's arms. Ignoring the clamouring voices and pounding feet, I closed my ears to the intrusion; closed my eyes too as my lips met hers. The muscles of my exposed back relaxed as the prospect of sword blades sliding between my ribs faded from my mind, as a dream fades on waking to the brightness of a new day. Yet the sharp pain of swords slashing at my flesh never came. Instead, as my eyes opened and my lips reluctantly left Talmyra's, I became aware of a ring of bronzed, weather-beaten faces, staring down at us. From their midst stepped a tall warrior in the robes and golden helm of a Fazeer, a leader of the Dal-Purai. Even without those trappings his bearing and haughty looks would have marked him as a man of authority. He bowed respectfully when I stood to meet him, hand touching chest, lips and brow in traditional desert greeting. I returned it but he seemed not to notice, turning his attention to Talmyra, propped on one elbow as she had been when I last saw her fourteen eternal days ago. "You are the leader of the riders, those who have blunted my vengeance on these infidel invaders."

The words were spoken not as a question, but as a statement of fact. Talmyra nodded. The Fazeer's eyes, dark above the hawk-like prow of his nose, seemed more amused than angry. "You rode here to save this man. Risked your own life for him?"

This time Talmyra's answer was a firm, "Yes, I did."

"And you rode not with anger in your heart but love?"

Talmyra's eyes found mine as she answered this last question. "Yes."

Bright teeth flashed as the Fazeer smiled. "So. It is good. I give you your lives. They may yet achieve more than your deaths."

His hand flashed forward as he spoke, the sword he held arcing toward me. I caught it by the bloodstained ivory hilt. "I pray that you learn well from the mistakes of your father, Prince Kaylen. Or rather, King Kaylen. I would welcome an invitation to your wedding ceremony."

With those parting words he turned, cloak swirling around him as he strode through the ranks of his warriors. I knelt beside Talmyra again as the Dal-Purai turned their backs to us, and we watched together as they melted back into the shimmering desert dunes, one last howl fading with them.

The End

Michael Graves is 37, English, and currently lives and works in Germany as an IT systems administrator at ESA. Writing influences include David Gemmell and Bernard Cornwell, amongst many others. The story One Last Kiss, One Last Caress *was influenced by a number of historical events—Rorke's Drift, Custer's Last Stand, the Alamo and the Charge of the Light Brigade, plus David Gemmell's "Legend."*

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"Gave him a nasty shock from three feet away. Hang onto your clipboard and give 'em plenty of room. They're mean."

"Don't be saying that," Wolfe said. "They hear you, Tam. Nice girl. Easy girl. Don't be listening to Tam. You trust Joe. I'll take good care of you."

Tam rolled his eyes.

"Give him the Disneyland tour," Stamos said, stepping back, checking his pager. "Got an incident in Etch. Be right back."

After two years in the industry, the lingo came much more naturally to James. When he had first joined the company after graduating from college, he was lost in a world of technology jargon. Each fab had several functional areas dedicated to specific parts of the semiconductor manufacturing process – odd names like Litho, Dry Etch, Wet Etch, Thin Films, Diffusion, Planar, Solder Bump. And now Implant – one of the most complex areas in an already complex manufacturing process that built tiny microelectronic cities out of millions of transistors on an area the width of James' fingernail. Each little square of silicon, when completed, was worth much more than its weight in gold. James stared inside the guts of the Implanter machine from the door. It was a mess of twisted machinery – gas lines, cables, and odd-angled fittings. But the silver chamber that Tam and Wolfe had come from gleamed, smooth and sleek.

"What's that?" James asked, pointing.

"Ah, that's the process chamber. That's where the wafers get zapped. Come on in."

"What about the high voltage?"

"Already cleared it. It's safe, sup."

"I'll fit in there?"

Wolfe chuckled. "*I* fit."

James watched Tam duck back into the silver chamber and let his curiosity get the better of him. He had to duck to enter, but it was roomier than he had expected. The walls were shined to a mirror finish. A huge circular disc, probably four feet in diameter, crowded the wall on the far side, connected to the chamber with a huge mechanical arm.

"Most of the stuff that'll kill you is over there," Tam said, pointing back out the way they had come. "Really, the shell is just that, something to keep folks away from the parts. The A-1000 is an older toolset. This one, this beauty, is the first one installed in this fab."

"What's its name?"

"IMP01. First eight inch ion implanter we bought. The engineers like to mess around with it during day shift, but we get it at nights and baby-sit her. The real dangerous stuff comes from over there. See that box? That's where the source and extraction units are. Do you know how it works?"

"Nope. I came from a different functional area."

"Diffusion, right? That's okay, I'll try and keep it simple. In Implant, we dope the wafers with atoms after getting the right ones with the right charges. That's what turns on the transistors, gives them their charge so they can work right. Depending on the wafer layer, you use a different element. These things use phosphorous, indium, boron, arsenic…"

"Arsenic?" James said, stifling another yawn.

"Yup," Wolfe said, his meaty hands planted on the outer door. "They have the right charges. You give 'em a little lick from a tungsten filament…"

"Are you signing his safety checklist, Wolfe? Or am I? If I remember right, Stamos asked me to do it."

Wolfe snarled something under his breath that sounded a lot like *stick*.

Tam craned his neck as Wolfe walked away. "The gas lines feed into the source chamber. First the filament heats up, spits out electrons like you wouldn't believe. The gas likes to dance with it. Then with a little physics, we extract the right charged atoms and they come shooting out like the Death Star blasting a planet."

"Into the wafers?" James asked.

"Not yet. They have to run a 90 degree turn first. That's called analysis. The dead atoms, the neutrals, get stuck there. Only those with the right charge and weight can make the turn, see? Then they pass through acceleration where they get a little turbocharge and come in here. See that big disc hanging outside?"

"It's huge. Is that the wafer handler?"

"Uh-huh. The wafers line up and this thing spins at a couple thousand RPM. See how the disc is connected to that metal arm? It spins and then the arm brings it back and forth, back and forth. That helps control the dosage and uniformity on the wafer. Some implants are fast – just a quick burst, couple passes over the wheel. Others are longer and slow. Can take… I dunno, nearly an hour or so to process a whole batch."

"Do all the gases go at once? Phosphorous and arsenic…"

"No, no, no. That would contaminate the wafers. They're done differently. Each recipe has a different dose, calls for a different ionization."

"But how can the machine tell the difference?"

The eyes smiled again. "There's about fifty computers inside this shell controlling it. The magnets in the analysis make sure the right atoms are passing through the curve. Only atoms at the precise weight will make the turn. Then there are the cryopumps that suck this chamber down close to true vacuum. And let's not forget that things get so hot and heavy in the extraction chamber with the high voltage that it actually creates X-rays."

"You're kidding!"

"Ain't kidding, sup. But don't worry, the X-rays can't leave as long as the suppression electrode is in place. To work on this tool, I had to go to school in freezing Boston for six weeks. Then there's two more classes after that. It's a beast. But it's the coolest tool in the fab. And the most dangerous. But it's the tool that spins sand into gold, if you know what I mean."

"Silicon," James said, reaching out to touch the silvery interior, but Tam grabbed his wrist. Roughly.

"Particles, James. Don't be touching anything in here."

"What?"

"Particles are the enemy. Particles mess everything up. Remember, we're playing with physics on the atomic level. If we need our atoms to hit a specific depth of the wafer, and there's a dust fleck on the wafer, it changes the depth. It has to be totally precise. We're talking measuring in angstroms here. Wolfe and I spend hours cleaning the chamber as part of the regular preventative maintenance. These machines are cool, but they're messy."

"Looks clean enough to eat off of to me."

"You can't see these particles. I'll have Tommy run you a surfscan after a batch has been implanted so you can see how many particles are on a clean wafer compared to a dirty one. Gotta keep this bad boy clean. The filters in this tool aren't like your swimming pool filters. They capture a lot of junk, but it's still hard to keep the little buggers out. You look sleepy, sup. How long have you been on night shift?"

"Two years, but it's not that. Got a daughter going through the terrible two's right now. Doesn't want me to sleep when I get home in the morning."

Tam nodded sympathetically. "Got two kids myself. Sometimes I fall asleep reading them a story when I get home."

"And they let you? How lucky. I'm feeling a little cramped in here. Thanks for the tour, Tam. See you at midshift stand-up."

"Sometimes we can't make it for midshift stand-up, sup." Tam's voice was flat. "Doing the PMs on these guys can take a while."

James stood and stretched. He turned back to Tam. "I want to see you there at midshift, Tam."

"Can't always be there, sup. Gotta keep these tools running."

James had heard about Tam and his gang of equipment techs. The other sup's in the fab had already warned him. Above the rules. Taking long breaks. Too good to run wafers if someone was out sick.

"See you at midshift, Tam."

* * *

James stamped from the gown room into the main aisle in the fab, his eyes burning with fatigue. He had come at midshift, but Tam and Wolfe and the other equipment techs had not bothered to show up for midshift stand-up. The process techs were all there, of course. They were the ones who kept the fab running, constantly gorging and disgorging the black slotted wafer carriers from the huge ion implanters. Sometimes the bay was a blur of motion as techs juggled lots to quickly feed another batch while the set-up was the same. There was an art to it, he discovered. Run so many batches at phosphorous and then do a boron implant. But not too many or that made the chamber filthy and the surfscan would fail. Tommy was the best, adjusting the knobs and dials below the touchscreen monitors, getting the voltage and arc to the perfect balance. Their work was tangible. Batches of wafers got processed. The computer chips that these wafers created were worth a lot of money.

The double-glass doors swooshed open, leading him to the far bay at the eastern quarter of the fab. It took ten minutes to walk there. The maze of wafers sped over his head. He was used to it, remembering his first time in a semiconductor fab. The black boxes full of wafers journeyed above his head from station to station, webbing in and out across the square miles in the complex. Each black box had circular wafers, and each wafer was worth a quarter million dollars. That made each box about three million dollars. And he saw hundreds of them, like ants, on the rails above his head.

Yet Tam and his boys sat on their hands in the break room, waiting for the next scheduled maintenance or source change. Rarely bothering to show-up at the midnight passdown.

He walked down to Bay 26 – Ion Implant. The clock on the wall read 02:34AM.

Tommy was gone, which surprised him. Normally there was someone in the bay at all times. He had six implanters, two high-current ones – the A-1000 – as well as two medium and two low-current ones, the XR8's. He checked his clipboard, looking at the cleanroom paper's skeletal readout of where the different wafers were in the line. Walking from screen to screen, he checked the tool set-ups. Two were down in PM and he thought he could hear Tam and Wolfe clanging around behind the partition wall.

Where was Tommy? In the chase behind the tool too?

He checked the next two tools and saw them processing long recipes. They would take an hour each to finish. James waited around, wanting to rub his eyes but knowing he wasn't

supposed to or risk spreading particles in the area. He was baking in the Gortex suit.

Something on the wafer display monitor at IMP01 caught his eye.

There was a camera inside the processing chamber that allowed the technicians to see the robotic wafer handler paddles load and unload from the huge wheel. A dexterous little robot arm dished the wafers from a vacuum wand to the wheel and loaded them back into the black wafer bucket. But that wasn't what caught his eye.

There was something in the chamber. Which wasn't possible because it was still under vacuum.

Something moving.

James walked up to the monitor, watching the robot arm serve more wafers.

The creature was the size of a lizard. It looked like a gecko, tiny skinny fingers sticking to the wheel. But it had a narrow flat head, a flat face, and long pointed ears. Its entire form braced with little silvery scales.

It seemed to sense it was being watched and turned its ice-blue eyes at him.

James dropped his clipboard.

It smiled with all its little teeth, and with a darting movement, disappeared out of the camera's line of vision. He heard little clicking noises.

"James?"

James turned, his heart pounding, and saw Tommy at the head of the bay. He was from India, his skin so dark that his eyes stood out.

"What are you doing in there? Were you…looking for someone?"

James swallowed. He glanced back at the wafer handling monitor. Wafer after wafer went from the slots to the wheel.

"No…nothing," he stammered, bending down to get the clipboard. "Just…just looking for you."

"What do you need?" Tommy asked. "Come, come out of there." Tommy himself didn't step into the bay and beckoned him gently. "Are you all right?"

"I'm…I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You look a little…how shall I say? A little pale. But that's normal for you, I think."

"I'm fine. I need a drink of water. Thanks, Tommy."

James wanted to run out of the fab.

"Did you…are you okay, James? Did you see…what did you want to talk to me about?"

"I'm fine. It's nothing. Just the backlog of wafers behind IMP04."

He hurried as fast as he could walk.

* * *

The sun shone above the hills of the East Bay as he crested 580 into the Livermore valley. He couldn't stop thinking about it. It was a trick. A hallucination caused from lack of sleep and the late hour. There were no little…*demons*…in the fab. He had imagined it.

Or maybe it was a prank? Maybe it was a little joke the equipment techs liked to play? They knew those tools inside and out. Tam could have figured out a way to interfere with the wafer handling video feed. Play a recording instead of watching the actual movements. When he'd gotten back to his desk, he expected to hear them all laughing. But no one said anything. The building was as quiet as it always was that late at night. How would Tam have known he

was coming in at 2:36AM?

Driving like a robot himself, he took the Brentwood exit headed up Vasco road. It was just after 7AM and he wanted nothing more than to drop into bed.

As the garage door closed, James went inside through the laundry room and heard Abbie screaming that her pop-tart had broken.

James grit his teeth and dropped his blue igloo lunch bag on the counter.

Marie, flustered, turned around.

"Can you watch Abbie while I run to Safeway?"

He let out a seething sigh.

"IT'S BROO-O-O-K-E-E-E-N!!!!" Abbie wailed.

"We need milk. We're all out. I'll only be gone for thirty minutes. Just put her in front of the Wiggles and…"

"She likes it when I dance to the Wiggles. I'm exhausted. I don't want to…"

"You're exhausted? Do you know what she did last night? She woke me up four times to go potty and she didn't even go! Try taking care of her all day long. All her messes, all her tantrums…"

"Look, I'm sorry she's a pill for you. I'm tired, that's…"

"At least you know how I feel. I'm only asking you to watch her for thirty minutes. It won't kill you."

"Fine. I'll watch her. Just hurry, okay?"

"IT'S BROO-O-O-K-E-E-E-N!!!!"

Marie grabbed her keys and headed for the door.

James looked down at the broken pop-tart and grabbed half of it.

The tantrum stopped.

"MINE!!" she screeched, grabbing for it.

"Wanna go watch Wiggles, Abbie?"

"Uh-uh."

"Is that a yes or no?"

"Uh-uh."

"Yes?"

"Uh."

James grabbed the DVD and inserted it into the handler. It slid back inside and started spinning. For an instant, he thought he heard little clicking sounds coming from inside it. But the music blasted and blared as it started up with the silly theme song.

James fell asleep on the couch.

* * *

The beeping. Something was beeping. Something was beeping very loud.

His pager.

James rubbed his eyes, coming awake on the couch. Marie had tossed a blanket over him. There was a note on the microwave and the house was silent. Except for the beeping.

Fumbling at his belt, he wrestled the pager out and stared at the number.

55513-911.

His heart raced. It was the operations manager's phone number. 9-1-1 was urgent.

After tossing off the blanket, he stumbled to the cordless phone and picked it up. It was

11:30am. Three hours of sleep?

Punching in the numbers, he listened to the beeps and then it rang.

"This is Myers."

James cleared his throat. "This is James. You…you paged me?"

"What happened last night?"

James' heart raced. "Sir?"

"What happened in Implant on your shift last night?"

"I don't understand." In his mind, the image of the wafer handling monitor played itself again and again. A hallucination caused by lack of sleep. It was lack of sleep, nothing else.

"What PMs were performed?"

"Uh…" James' mind raced. "They were working on IMP05, 08, and 12. Source change on IMP04. And…"

"What about IMP01?"

"IMP01? Um…nothing…not even a source change."

Silence.

"The filters were installed upsidedown. Upsidedown, Shuler! The last scheduled PM was four days ago, on your shift. That means we've been running wafers like that for four days! I want you in here. I want you in here as fast as you can drive. We're still trying to get our arms around how many lots have been affected. How many passed through that tool."

Each wafer was worth a quarter million dollars. His stomach lurched. Filters upside-down meant they weren't stopping any particles from getting into the tool.

"I'll be…I'll be right there."

* * *

James stared at the report, page after page, with lot numbers highlighted in blue, green, and pink. It was a major excursion. Probably the worst since the fab's start-up. Twelve pages worth of lot numbers. His stomach wrenched.

Kevin Chen, the Yield Engineer, paced along the perimeter of the tables. Myers sat at the head, his face red. Myers had done the Iron Man. He was a giant and had been with the fab since its first wafers were processed on four inch wafers. He did not suffer fools and had fired past supervisors when their functional areas suffered in productivity. The Implant engineers clustered like vultures, perhaps wondering if James would be the next meal.

"The pink ones are the most critically impacted lot numbers," Kevin said. "These were doses at critical layers that'll almost certainly cause a yield hit. The green are at less threatening layers. We're hoping a small percentage of them will be salvageable depending on the particle contamination. The blue, I think, will be all right. We are hoping only a small fraction of those will be lost."

"How did this happen?" Myers whispered, his eyes boring into James, but he was addressing IMP01's owner, Maxwell Neilson.

Max was gaunt with a stubby goatee and long, curl-ridden hair. "I checked the PM logs and saw that the last major was done Saturday night. That's four days ago, *assuming* it was done then."

"What do you mean 'assuming'?"

Max shrugged, looking down at his hands. "It is possible it was done previous to that, but the in-line monitors would have caught it. We'd have already had yield losses if that were the

case."

Myers leaned back in his chair and nearly went over. "Why didn't the in-line monitors catch it earlier? It's been four days, Neilson!"

Tony Hendrick, the equipment manager, leaned forward. He wore a dark blue t-shirt and original 501s. Not the pre-faded kind, the original denim. "Because the alarm sensor was disabled. Manually. If Sandra had not looked at the trend chart this morning on a whim, we may not have seen it for several more days."

Myers let out a stinging string of curses.

"You can manually disable the alarm?" James asked.

Tony didn't even look at him. "The one who opened the PM checklist was Tam."

"I want Tam in here," Myers said lethally.

James leaned forward. "I've been paging him since I got here. He's probably still asleep. Can we wait until he gets here before assuming…"

"Shuler. You can't begin to imagine how much trouble you're in. How much trouble Tam is in. Neilson, figure out the chain of events. Find out how long that sensor has been disabled. Kevin, lock down all the infected lots. Don't let them be processed. We are line down in Implant until we figure this out. Hendrick, how's IMP01?"

"Particle level is out of control. Last two surfscans failed."

Sickness. James was sick to his stomach. The look on everyone's faces told him that he was a dead man career-wise. No one wanted to make eye contact with him.

He bit his lip. "Is there any chance this may have happened last night?"

Hendrick glared. "You can't open the tool without logging in a PM unless you override the process flow computer. No one can do that. Not even me."

James nodded, staring down at his cleanroom clipboard.

* * *

Tam's face burned a fiery red. He paced on the other side of the conference room table, swearing under his breath.

"The last preventative maintenance was over the weekend, during our shift. Who else could have done it?"

"What else," Tam whispered, his face scrunching.

"What did you say?"

Tam slammed his hands on the table. "I installed those filters right. I've been doing that PM for years, James. I know which end is up."

Had he said *what* else?

"What about the system alarms? Did you disable them?"

Tam hissed and folded his arms. "No."

"Tam."

"I didn't!"

"What am I supposed to do? Your system ID is logged in for the PM. It happened on our shift. Are you thinking…someone else opened it up and switched them around? To get us in trouble?"

Tam stared at the floor. "I installed those filters right, sup."

"Are there any video cameras in the chase behind IMP01?"

"No. There aren't any back there. Not in the chases. Not in Implant."

There was something in Tam's eyes. Fear.

"Are you okay?"

"Why should I be okay?! IMP01 just misprocessed a hundred and ten batches. A hundred and ten! And I'm going to get blamed…I'm going to get…it's going to be my fault."

The look on his face – the anguish.

"I've got three kids, sup. We're barely making our house payment in Pleasanton. I don't know…what else I can…" He stormed out of the conference room.

James stared down at his clipboard and the fat, stapled report with the green, pink, and blue highlighted hash marks. A sour feeling had lodged somewhere behind his ribs, keeping the sick feeling company.

"I've got a wife and kid too," James muttered. He rubbed his eyes, wondering how he was going to make it through his normal shift that night. If he'd dare walk down Bay 26 again by himself.

* * *

James started, coming awake suddenly. He'd fallen asleep in his cubicle, head on the desk. His heart raced. If a technician had walked by and seen him asleep, he'd be in even bigger trouble. They'd walk him to the door and take his badge for that, especially after what had happened with the PM.

His Instant Messenger account was up, a message blinking.

IMP01>04:28AM> ARE YOU AWAKE YET?

He stared at it. Slowly, he stood and looked over the cube wall, expecting to see a technician grinning wickedly at him. The tech bullpen had a few technicians on break. He heard them over the cube wall, but didn't see any looking at him.

Who had IM'd him? Someone from Implant? Or a tech from another functional area with a cruel streak. He grabbed his clipboard and walked down the dull gray carpet and turned the corner into the bullpen area. The Implant corner was empty, but that wasn't surprising. The shift was doing everything it could to bring the particle count down. At midshift, the surfscan had shown an increase in particles. An increase – after four equipment techs had scrubbed down the silver chamber with alcohol-soaked wipes.

He wove around to Thin Films and saw Stamos in front of a desktop with a browser open to ESPN.com. James walked up behind him and saw that he did not have the IM software launched.

Stamos looked over his shoulder, his blond-highlights and neck tattoo glimmering under the fluorescent lights. "What's up, sup?"

"Anyone else around?" James asked, scanning into the Litho aisle and seeing four technicians eating Krispy Kremes.

"Just a break, James. You lookin' for Tam?"

"You seen him?"

"Not all night. He's been buried in that Implanter. Haven't seen those guys work so hard in months." He pulled the ERT radio up. "Want me to call around for him?"

"No. I'll page him. Thanks."

He walked back to his cube.

IMP01>04:28AM> ARE YOU AWAKE YET?
IMP01>04:33AM> I'M NOT IN THE BULLPEN, JAMES

Something cold went down James' spine. He grabbed his water bottle and took a sip, staring at the letters on his screen, waiting to see if another message appeared.

Nothing did.

He reached for the keyboard.

>WHO ARE YOU?

He sat back, watching. Was this a techician? Or maybe another supervisor? Darren was good with computers.

IMP01>04:36AM> I THOUGHT IT WAS OBVIOUS. IMP01

>IS THIS DARREN SCHIELE? I SWEAR I'LL KILL YOU…

The reply came before he finished typing.

IMP01>04:37AM> THAT IS NOT MY NAME. THIS IS IMP01. IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, GO TO MYERS OFFICE ON THE 4TH FLOOR RIGHT NOW.

The window with the IM closed itself.

James blinked, staring at the screen, wondering if he should see a doctor. It was a gag. It had to be. It was probably Darren. He was always doing some joke or another. Or one of the other supervisors. Or an engineer. They had sick senses of humor. He rubbed his mouth, staring at the screen.

Go to Myer's office on the fourth floor. Right now.

Maybe it was a joke. The upper floors of the building were off-limits to technicians during night shift. But he was a supervisor. Was it okay if he was there? It was 4:30 in the morning. Myers wouldn't arrive for several more hours. Probably a joke. A gag.

What if it wasn't?

He swallowed, clenching the armrests until his fingers hurt.

After shoving away from the desk, he grabbed his clipboard and started up the stairs.

* * *

The fourth floor was dark except for every third light and only one of the fluorescent strips was illuminated. The cubicle walls looked like headstones. His shoes scuffed on the carpet as he walked down the main aisle. He made plenty of noise to be sure to alert anyone on the way that was coming. Licking his lips didn't seem to moisten them. The name plates were too dark to read as he walked by, but he knew the names of most of the operations managers and where they sat. Myers' office was near the end, next to the General Manager's. No tapping on keys. No office lights on.

His heart pounded in his chest. What was he doing?

Myer's office.

He paused and peered inside the darkened cube. An ergonomically positioned keyboard tray seemed to be hanging in the air, but it was dark. The swivel chair was cocked the other direction. A single light on the phone was lit up. Papers and file folders had been stacked in haphazard mounds across every inch of desk space – trend charts, inventory flows, all peeking at him from beneath the stacks. The white board was full of wafer lot numbers, some of which had been crossed out. Others circled. Lines connected some of them and on the top of the board was written "IMP01 EXCURSION"

James licked his lips again and stared for anything out of the ordinary. The cube was dark, the computer off.

Nothing.

James leaned against the cube partition, feeling like an idiot.

The phone on the desk started to ring. The sound jolted him.

It was too dark to see the LCD display on the phone. Who would be calling Myers at four in the morning? James reached over the desk and flipped the cabinet underlighting switch and the desktop flickered a few times before illuminating.

The LCD display on the phone read: CHASE26-IMPLANT.

His heart thundered. Should he pick it up?

It rang three times and then went to Myer's voicemail.

James stared at it, waiting for the voicemail light to brighten. It didn't. He sat down in Myer's chair.

The phone rang again. CHASE26-IMPLANT.

"What is going on?" James whispered, staring at the handset. Should he pick it up?

He grabbed it on the third ring. Holding the receiver to his ear, he listened.

There was a hissing noise, the sound of the air handlers whirring, knocking sounds. It was loud. It sounded like the chase.

He heard footsteps coming down the aisle and his heart stopped.

Putting down the handset, he listened as the heavy footfalls grew louder. Who on the fourth floor was coming in so early? The engineers worked day shift, eight to five. Some came as early as seven. But no one came in that early. A janitor? A security guard wondering what he was doing up on the fourth floor?

Myers loomed from the gap in the partition wall.

"What are you doing in my office, Shuler?"

James' heart seized with spasms of shock and fear. His brain went numb. Words surged and vanished inside his head. Myers – the factory manager. Myers – the Iron Man. He didn't suffer fools gladly – he didn't suffer them at all!

Myers' face glowered. "What are you doing in my office?"

"I…uh…I'm…uh…"

Nothing. He could think of nothing to say. Nothing that sounded remotely logical or believable. What *was* he doing in Myer's office at four in the morning? Answering an instant message from IMP01? The lighting in the cube made Myers look like a vampire. His brows furrowed.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry…I'm sorry, sir. I'm sorry. I'm…I'm sorry."

"What were you looking for? Were you going through my papers?" His voice lowered threateningly.

"No! I was…no…it was…I was…" *Think! Of something! Anything!* "No one's ever on the fourth floor. It's okay for sup's to be up here. Not the techs. I was looking for…hoping to find something about…about the excursion! The surfscans are still dirty. Every one, even after they've scrubbed it down. Particles. Everything is out of control. Hasn't lowered at all. I'm sorry, sir. I…I just don't know what to do."

Myers stared at him. "Why would you be in *my* office? You know more than I do right now. Why did you come here?"

Tell him. Tell him? Sure, so he can fire you for insanity instead of falling asleep? What was I doing here?

The phone rang again - CHASE26-IMPLANT.

James got out of the chair as if the seat had burned him. Myers looked at it, warily, and then grabbed the receiver. "Myers. Uh-huh. Hmmm." He waited, staring at James with one eye as if saying *don't move…I haven't finished with you yet.* "Still OOC at the end of shift. Got it. Thanks, Wolfe." He set the receiver down.

Wolfe!

A hot surge of rage scalded James' cheeks. Wolfe! Was Wolfe the cause of all this? Did he know a way of hacking into computers?

Myers cocked his head. "D'you fall asleep in my office, Shuler? So no one else would see you? How much sleep did you get yesterday?"

"Three hours."

Myers snorted. "Go home, Shuler. I've got to disposition all these contaminated lots and then figure out how to run the fab with only one A-1000. Go home. You're in enough trouble as it is."

* * *

It was 5:45 when he drove into the garage. The car blared at him when he opened the door because the headlights were still on. Clicking them off, he stumbled from the car and opened the door. The stillness in the house reminded him of the fourth floor.

He slumped off his bag on the washing machine and pulled himself upstairs.

"Home early?" Marie said with a yawn, flopping back some of the covers.

"Hmmm."

"You were gone when Abbie and I got home…" she stopped, yawning, "…yesterday. What time did you go in?"

"Noon."

"James? That's a long shift. That's a shift and a half. Are they going to pay you overtime?"

"I don't think so." He shrugged off his shirt and undid his belt.

"Ask for it. They can't make you work like that and not pay you for it."

He wanted to laugh. "It'll be all right. I'm tired. I'm very tired."

Wolfe. It made some sense. It made a lot of sense. If he had turned the filters upsidedown when Tam wasn't watching. A pretty mean trick to do to a fellow employee. Wolfe would be fired if James could prove it. But no cameras in the chase. Not in Implant.

"Abbie has a doctor's appointment this afternoon. I'd like to talk to Doctor Jamall about her potty training. Can you come?"

"What?"

"Can you come to Abbie's doctor appointment?"

"I don't…what time is it at?"

"Three o'clock. You normally get up at two."

His head felt like exploding. "Wake me up at one-thirty."

"Can we talk, James?"

He planted his hands on the bed. "I need sleep. I got three hours yesterday. I almost ran off the road driving home."

"Fine."

He was asleep before he heard her.

* * *

James typed the password into his system and launched his e-mail. Eighty-five messages, all about the IMP01 Excursion. Something buzzed in his mind. Abbie had woken him up twice, whispering that she was going to play with her dolls. Whispering that she wanted to watch the Wiggles again. He almost smacked her for tugging on his shirtsleeve.

He started through the messages, the earliest one first. The surfscans on IMP01 were still out of control. A technician from the vendor was flying in to look at the tool. Neilson had written a scathing e-mail about night shift and how little they had done. When he had opened the tool after venting it, the chamber was filthy with particles. Some were large enough to see. Hendrick had started an e-mail thread about consistency in doing wipedowns and whether to use alcohol or only distilled water.

IMP01>4:12PM> YOU CAN END THE EXCURSION, JAMES

James' hand jerked on the mouse when the IM screen popped up. Was Wolfe in an hour early then?

>JOE YOU DO KNOW HOW MUCH TROUBLE YOU'RE IN?

IMP01>04:13PM> THAT IS NOT MY NAME. IT'S IMP01

>I'M ABRAHAM LINCOLN. NICE TO MEET YOU.

IMP01>04:14PM> YOU STILL DON'T BELIEVE ME AFTER LAST NIGHT?

>AFTER MYERS? ARE YOU KIDDING?

IMP01>04:15PM> YOU'LL BELIEVE ME TONIGHT

James reached for the drop-down menu to print out the IM text, but it closed before he could click on it. He went to the message logs, but there wasn't anything there. He swore and leaned back, folding his arms tightly. E-mail continued to fill his inbox. Another one from Kevin Chen, the Yield engineer. Day shift had not improved the particle count at all. Opening up the inventory management tool, he scrolled down the wafer column and his heart lurched. Serious inventory buildup was happening behind the Implant process steps. With only one A-1000 implanter, the line was slowing down. How many millions of dollars of revenue was being

delayed? It made him sick thinking about it.

IMP01>04:25PM> YOU WILL BELIEVE ME TONIGHT

* * *

It happened shortly before the midshift stand-up. James' phone lit up: BAY26-IMPLANT. He picked it up. "This is James."

"This is Wolfe. We've got a problem. The other A-1000 is down."

"What?"

"Surfscan just failed. Particles have been trending high on the tool all day, but it officially went out of control just now. We've got to bring her down and do a major."

His stomach clenched. "How did it happen?"

"We've been using IMP13 like a dog since 01 went down. Other than source changes, they've been running her non-stop. It's a messy process, sir. I'm not surprised we trended high."

James bit his lip, the worry blooming inside him. "Will you have her up before the end of the shift?"

"Not likely. It takes four hours to pump her down to vacuum. That's after we do a wipe down. I think she'll come up again during day shift. Better get working on it."

"Who was working on the tool with you? Tam?"

"Yeah. You want to talk to him?"

"Yes."

The phone was handed over. "What is it, James?"

"Keep an eye on Wolfe while you work on 13. Don't ask questions. Just do it."

"I will. See you at mid-shift?"

"You'd better be working on 13!"

"Sure thing, sup."

* * *

"They're sending in Travis Keyes from Gloucester this weekend," Hendrick said. His eyes were red and swollen. "Engineering coverage is twenty-four seven until we're line up again."

Myers steepled his fingers over his mouth. "And what's the fix? What's the plan?"

"Wipe down, pump down, vent the tool, wipe down, pump down, vent the tool. Keep repeating it until she spits it all out."

"Neilson?"

"No other options. We can't cross-process every step on the lower-power implanters. Only the A-1000s can do those layers. But even if we could, it just takes away capacity from the layers they are dedicated for. We're stuck."

James stared at the ink-dots on the whiteboard. Everyone had almost forgotten about the wafers that had been processed when the filters were installed wrong. The entire fab was dying slowly. Why process too much work through Lithography if the A-1000's were both down? There was nothing that could be done until the tools were brought up. And with huge ion implanters, a new installation would take months, let alone pulling out the old equipment.

James left the meeting feeling horrible. The surfscans on IMP13 had been trending more and more out of control and his shift hadn't even started yet. He slumped down in his chair and

found the message waiting for him.

IMP01>05:21PM> YOU CAN END THE EXCURSION, JAMES

He stared at the screen and then tossed his clipboard on the desk.

>HOW?

IMP01>05:22PM> I WILL TELL YOU TONIGHT

>WHEN?

IMP01>05:23PM> TONIGHT, JAMES

>WHEN??

The IM screen vanished.

* * *

After mid-shift stand-up, James left Bay 26 and hid in Chase 18 on the other side of Phase Three. The air handlers kept him cool in the Gortex suit. He clenched the clipboard in his hands and waited. From his vantage near the chase door, he had a glimpse of Bay 26. He waited and waited, checking the little clock read-out on a monitor as the minutes passed.

IMP01>01:03AM> ARE YOU READY, JAMES?

He stared at the screen. Had Wolfe seen him go into the chase? Or had another technician spied him out and told them?

>I'M READY

IMP01>01:04AM> GO TO CHASE 26

James bit his lip and then walked out the chase door and started down the hall. Bay 26 was empty, but he could hear the technicians working on IMP13. None of the technicians were in Bay 26. Granted, there weren't many wafers to process either with the inventory line being hopelessly tangled.

He pulled open the door to Chase 26 and felt the pressure differential create a gentle breeze on his face. The big shell of IMP01 stood at the end of the row of implanters. His oversized booties clopped as he walked. Hugging the clipboard to his chest, he reached the giant machine.

No one was there.

The panel door on the far side was open, the chamber vented, the wafer wheel out just like it had been his first day in Implant. There was a computer monitor on the outside of the tool that monitored gas flow.

IMP01>01:14AM> I'M INSIDE THE CHAMBER

He was sweating. It trickled down his ribs, soaked through the linen undergloves he wore beneath the latex gloves and made his eyes itch around the safety goggles.

He set down the clipboard and began typing.

>ARE YOU REAL?

IMP01>01:16AM> DO YOU WANT TO END THE EXCURSION?

James grabbed the clipboard and ducked to enter the silver processing chamber. He had to hunch over, like he had before, but it amazed him how two technicians could fit inside. With the wafer wheel arm inside, there would only be enough room for…

The wafer wheel spun on its pivot and joined him in the chamber. The door closed.

Panic.

Something locked and clicked. Something buzzed. A buzzing noise? Then a hissing sound. A hissing sound that came from several opening slats throughout the chamber. A feeling of complete cold leeched into the chamber. The cryo-pumps began sucking the air out of the chamber.

James' heart slammed in his chest. He pounded on the solid silver doors as the sucking sound increased.

"Hello, James."

He spun around as the gecko-like creature with silver scales crawled out from the cryo-pump valve.

Drawing air was like sucking through a straw.

"Thank you for coming, James. I haven't lured something alive in years. Now I can keep on spinning gold for your company. Something alive is dearer to me than all the treasures of the earth. Speak my name and you may go free."

He tried to draw in breath. He tried and couldn't get enough air. "Imp…"

"*That is not my name.*"

The End

JT Slane is another name for author Jeff Wheeler. As friends will attest, it is his 'jerkier' persona. A writer since high school, his interests include medieval history, playing music, Chinese martial arts, publishing Deep Magic, and spending time with family. He lives in Rocklin, California, with his wife and three children. He has three published books to his credit, Landmoor, Silverkin, and The Wishing Lantern and several more on the way. He welcomes reader feedback at www.jeff-wheeler.com.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

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Doc, obviously quite used to the effect Prince Charming had on females, was prepared. He popped my eyes back in their sockets, wiped the drool from my chin, closed my gaping mouth, and said to the prince, "She's charmed to meet you."

Then, he took me firmly by the arm. "Now that that's out of the way, let's meet the others."

The four ladies that had been clinging to the prince turned out to be none other than Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, and Rapunzel.

Then, there was Old Mother Hubbard, Dorothy from Oz, Hansel and Gretel, Tinkerbell, and the six remaining dwarves: Grumpy, Sleepy, Dopey, Happy, Sneezy, and Bashful.

"There. You've met the members of our sad little company."

At that Dorothy sniffed and Cinderella dabbed her eyes.

"As I told you before, a small unfortunate incident has occurred."

"Just a little mix up," said Old Mother Hubbard.

"A faux pas," said Prince Charming.

"A snafu," said Dorothy.

"A goof," said Dopey, grinning from ear to ear.

"Ok," I said. "I think you better tell me about it."

Doc cleared his throat. "Well, I think we better just *show* you."

With that, the characters moved to one side revealing a—

"Good God! What in the world is that?" I cried.

"It's not in the world. Not anymore," Doc said.

"It's hideous!" I cried. "And it smells!"

"As much in death as in life," Prince Charming replied.

"You mean . . . it's dead?" I asked.

"Yep. Yep. Dead," Dopey said, clapping his hands together.

"This not a snafu, a mix up, or a goof!" I cried. "THIS IS A DEAD BODY!"

"Shhh," Happy admonished.

"Who's body is it?" I asked.

"Not mine," said Cinderella.

"Not mine, either," replied Rapunzel.

"No- - No," I said. "What I mean is: who does the body belong to?"

"Not me," said Tinkerbell.

"Not me, either," said Hansel.

"Certainly not me," said Prince Charming.

"NO! I mean. Who *was* alive and is *now* dead?"

"Well, lots of people," Doc said. "Do you want me to name them all?"

"Yeah, you do that," I said sarcastically. "And when you get to who this was," I told him, poking the corpse with a stick. "LET ME KNOW!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that Miss Jean is trying to ascertain the name of the dearly departed," Prince Charming told them.

"Oh," said Doc. "That's easy enough. It's Wicked Stepmother."

Finally, I was getting somewhere.

"What happened to her?" I asked the characters, looking from face to face for an answer. They hemmed and hawed, looked at their feet and scratched their heads.

Then they all replied, "We don't know. Nope. We don't."

But Doc looked scared. "Miss Jean, the real trouble is this: *she* thinks that one of us may be responsible."

"She?"

Doc leaned close. "The witch."

I was clearly confused. "Which witch?"

"The wicked witch."

"Which wicked witch?" But alas, he knew not which wicked witch it was.

Suddenly! Without warning, the moon went dark, and the owls stopped hooing. (Yes . . . "hooing")

A wicked witch swept down on her broomstick and landed smack dab in the middle of our group.

"My Pretties!" she screeched in a voice that seriously lacked in auditory appeal. "I see that all the suspects are gathered and ready to be tortured."

"Don't you mean . . . questioned?" asked Happy.

The wicked witch shrugged, "Whatever makes you happy."

The dwarf said, "I am Happy!"

"Well good," the witch retorted. "Let's hope you stay that way!"

After seeing what had happened to Happy, I was reluctant to draw attention to myself. But I had to set one thing straight; so I gathered my courage and stepped forward. Clearing my throat, I bent close to her (as close as one would want to get to a wicked witch) and said quietly, "Excuse me. I just wanted to clarify one small thing. I am not a suspect."

The witch tipped back her pointy little hat and thrust her pointy little nose close to my face and screeched, "Oh, you're not, are you? We'll just see about that!"

Carrying her broom, the witch swept back and forth over the crime scene. She peered here and there and looked under this and that. When she was satisfied by all she had spied, she hooked her crooked fingers around her broom and thrust it in direction of our little group, squealing, "Murderer, killer, homicidal maniac, slaughterer, butcher. One of you killed Stepmother!"

"Now you hold on there," cried Grumpy.

"That's slander!" huffed Mother Hubbard.

"A monstrous lie!" said Prince Charming.

"A cauldron of false accusations," Doc told her.

"Character assassination!" I added.

But the witch was not to be deterred. "Since you all seem to be a bit squeamish about being tortured, why don't we just have a little chat. I'll ask the questions; you make up the answers."

"Make up the answers!" I cried. "We're dealing with a murder here! It's imperative that everyone tell the truth."

Well, that did it.

"The truth!" they all cried.

"The truth has no place in fantasy!" croaked the wicked witch. "If you wanted the truth you should have stayed in non-fiction."

I tried to explain. "What I meant is this. If ever we are to get to the bottom of this mystery . . ."

"There she goes changing genres on us," Grumpy interrupted.

I was getting nowhere, fast. "All I'm saying is that we need to find out the facts."

"She used the f-word," Bashful giggled. "The four letter f-word."

"F-A-C-T-S has five letters," I informed him.

"Oh, my fairy ears!" Tinkerbell cried, clutching the sides of her head.

"Stop the act, Tinkerbell. We all know you have a mouth like a bilge rat," Dorothy snapped.

Tinkerbell put her fairy hands on her fairy hips and retorted, "As a matter of FACT . . ."

"Oh please! Could we all just keep our language fantasy friendly? There are children present," Old Mother Hubbard pleaded, nodding her head in the direction of Hansel and Gretel.

"You're a fine one to show concern for children." The witch gave Mother Hubbard a snaggle-toothed smile. "I have a bone to pick, and we might as well start with *you*."

Flustered, Mother Hubbard straightened her frumpy frock. "I haven't the vaguest idea what you mean."

"Then I guess I'll just have to tell you," the old hag cackled. "What I *mean* is . . . You are the real mother of Prince Charming!"

Prince Charming looked shocked—gorgeous, but shocked. "But . . . but I thought my mother was the Old Woman who lived in the shoe."

The wicked witch crowed, "That's what Ma Hubbard wanted everyone to think. When you were born, My Pretty Prince, your real mother, Ma Hubbard, left you on a shoe's footstep - - I mean doorstep. And the Old Woman who lived in that shoe found you and because she had too many children, she didn't know what to do."

"Well, for badness sake," said Sneezy, shaking his head.

Wild-eyed, frothing at the mouth, and very likely constipated, the witch was obviously enjoying herself.

"And that brings us to the corpse at hand. You see, Stepmother found out that Ma Hubbard was the real mother of Prince Charming and she decided to blackmail old Hubbard. But Ma had reached the bottom of the barrel; she didn't have the money. So, she went to the cupboard and got her dog's bone. Then . . . then she whacked the old busy body on the head and ... KILLED HER! And worse still, her poor pooch didn't get supper!"

"You have no proof!" cried Mother Hubbard.

"Ah, but I do. And here it is."

And there it was. Lying next to the hideous corpse. A dog bone.

"Oh, this is absurd!" cried Ma. "I did go to the cupboard. But it was bare. I swear!"

Strangely enough, the witch cackled, "Not a bad rhyme. I'll let you off this time. Besides, I have a few questions for these two little candy cottage-nibbling culprits."

"What?" cried Hansel and "Oh, no," whispered Gretel.

"Oh yes, My Rosy-Cheeked Rascals. Tell me. Does this sound familiar?

> Nibble. Nibble. Like a mouse.
> Who has been nibbling at my house?

Who knew the answer to this question? I'll tell you. Stepmother. That's who. She was going to blow the lid off your cottage consuming if you didn't pay up. But being the children of a poor woodcutter, you had no money. Sooooo . . . YOU KILLED HER . . .by stuffing her into an oven."

"We didn't kill her," Gretel cried, choking back the tears.

"Ha! Then how do you explain the scorch marks on the victim's clothes. And these," the witch said, stooping over the body. "These look like bread crumbs to me."

Hansel threw his hands up in surrender. "Ok. Ok, it's true. Gretel and I nibbled . . .

nibbled like a mouse. Gingerbread walls, frosted sugar cookie roofs, lollypop windows, gumdrop doorknockers. It's true. We chewed. . . but we didn't swallow!"

Well, it sounded like a lot of candy-coated road apples to me. But, the witch looked at them and shrugged. "You two are off the hook."

Turning her beady little eyes toward the remaining victims (corpse not included), the witch screamed, "Who's next? Let's get this show on the road."

Prince Charming stepped forward. "I'll be next. I have nothing to hide."

The witch sneered. "How cavalier! A regular white knight!" She poked his shoulder with the handle of her broom. "Well, there's a chink in your armor, My Pretty Prince. Stepmother had the goods on you."

"The goods, my dear lady?"

"Yes, the goods. She knew of your various relationships with women . . . fantasy women. She threatened to expose you for what you really are . . . a lady-killer. She wanted money. But you weren't going to give it to her. You came up with a plan instead. First, you turned on all your charm. Then, you wined her and dined her and swept her off her feet. She was dead before she hit the ground." The witch motioned to the corpse. "See that twinkle in her unblinking eyes. YOU KILLED HER WITH LOVE!"

Prince Charming smiled sweetly. "My dear lady. My liaisons with fantasy women are far from secret. They have been recorded in books . . . read by the fireside . . . told to children. And besides, I'm sure one of these lovely ladies on my arm can account for my whereabouts at the time of the murder."

The witch hissed and turned to Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, Cinderella, and Snow White.

"Stepmother knew all about you four damsels in distress, didn't she?"

The four breathtaking beauties just giggled.

The witch's blood-red eyes glinted. She screamed. "Stepmother knew that Sleeping Beauty didn't really prick her finger upon a spindle and fall into a deep sleep. She was just a lazy fifteen-year-old who preferred dreaming to sewing. Stepmother also knew that Rapunzel had been letting down her hair. And that Cinderella ran off to the ball instead of staying home to clean out the ashes like she was suppose to. And that Snow White wasn't really the fairest one of all."

Well, I can tell you, we were all pretty shocked at this news. But the wicked witch wasn't done yet.

"Stepmother was going to pop the cork if you didn't pay. Blackmail . . . it wasn't a pretty thing. So, you decided to do away with the nosey nuisance. You knew that you would have to work fast and that you would have to work together. First, you pricked Stepmother's finger on a spindle so she'd bleed to death. Then, you strangled her with a rope made of golden hair. Then, you ran her over with an enchanted pumpkin carriage. And then, you got together with your seven dwarf accomplices and fed her a poison apple. The evidence speaks for itself."

She pointed to a spindle, a rope, an apple, and a pumpkin that just happened to be lying next to the body.

"But, we didn't kill her!" the lovely ladies cried in unison. "We weren't even here at the time she was killed. We were with Prince Charming."

"I was with the beloved Prince. He kissed my cherry lips and I awoke," Sleeping Beauty breathed.

"He kissed me and woke me up, too," sang Snow White.

Cinderella said, "When Stepmother died, I was with Prince Charming at the ball. And besides, I couldn't have killed her. I had a curfew."

"I was with the Charming Prince. He helped me let my hair down," giggled Rapunzel.

In unison, they gushed:

> "We could not have committed such a heinous crime.
> For Prince Charming was with us all the time.
> He is our darling and our sweetie pie.
> Not to mention, our alibi."

The witch furrowed her brows briefly and then said, "I guess you've escaped the hangman's noose this time."

She glared at the remaining suspects. "Who's left? Oh, yes. Little fresh-faced Dorothy holding the cutesy dog."

The witch leaned close to Dorothy and rasped, "This isn't the first time you've killed, is it?"

Dorothy was defiant. "I haven't done anything wrong!"

"Oh, you haven't? Listen! You're not in Kansas anymore! We have laws against murder here," the witch screeched. "You killed to keep your ruby slippers."

"They're my slippers! I . . .I found them!"

"Found them? Ha! Stepmother discovered how you got your grabby little paws on the slippers and she wanted money to keep her trap shut! But you weren't going to pay. So you . . . KILLED HER!"

"How?" we all asked.

The witch eyeballed us. "It was easy. Dorothy dropped a house on her! And here's the evidence."

We all looked.

We were all puzzled.

"What?"

"Where?"

"Here!" the witch cried.

"Where?" we all asked.

"Right here! . . . It's a two-story house for pity sakes! Open your eyes!"

"Ohhhh . . . yeah!" we all said.

"Now I see it," said Snow White.

"Yep. Yep. There it is," said Dopey.

Doc smiled. "It was easy to overlook, being so huge and all."

Now that we were all on the same page, the witch looked at Dorothy and said, "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"At the time of the murder, I was in Oz with three companions."

The witch hissed unhappily and then whisked over to victimize the Seven Dwarves. "Stepmother knew that you dwarves were working an illegal diamond mine. To keep your secret, she wanted money."

"Diamonds," Doc corrected, and then got Grumpy's sharp elbow in the ribs. "Uh . . .um . . .what I mean is," Doc continued, "we don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't?" the witch asked.

"Uh . . .uh . . . No, we don't."

"Well, why didn't you say so!" the witch howled. And she was done with them.

Running out of suspects, she turned on Tinkerbell.

"The Stepmother was trying to blackmail you too. She knew that you were a member of the infamous Peter Pan Gang. And that you were responsible for kidnapping Wendy and her two brothers."

Tinkerbell stuck out her tongue at the witch. "Buzz off!"

Undeterred, the witch squealed, "YOU SPRINKLED HER TO DEATH WITH FATAL FAIRY DUST!"

"Listen, ya old hag. I didn't kill Stepmommy dearest. I wasn't anywhere around here."

"Well, where were you then?"

"I dunno. Peter and I, we got lost with the boys."

"The lost boys?"

"Them's the ones."

The witch seemed irked, but convinced.

Meanwhile, Grumpy was getting . . .well . . . grumpy. "Can we hurry up?"

"Keep your frown on. There's only one suspect left." Slowly . . . very slowly . . . black and menacing, she crept close. Her bloodshot eyes met mine.

I didn't flinch. "I already told you. I'm not a suspect."

The witch whispered in my ear, "Stepmother knew your deepest, darkest secret."

"And what, pray tell, would that be?" I asked, sarcastically.

"That you've been going places that you shouldn't have been going."

"Such as?" I inquired.

"The humor section of the library!"

The characters drew back from me.

"No!" cried Doc.

"You're kidding!" said Bashful.

"The nerve!" declared Dorothy.

"Well, I never!" cried Prince Charming.

I was caught. "I- -I can explain," I pleaded. "I—I was in a new library. And--and I was trying to find the fantasy section. And- and- "

"Oh, don't try to humor us!" huffed Mother Hubbard.

The black witch crowed at me, "Stepmother found out that you were trying to be FUNNY! And if you didn't pay up she was going to turn you in to . . ."

"A frog. A frog," Dopey cried, jumping up and down.

"No. In to the authorities. The FFAF. Friends of Fantasy Against Funny."

"No!" they all cried.

The witch was on a roll. "Yes. And you couldn't let that happen, could you, Missy? So, secretly, you checked a humor book out of the library. Then you cornered Stepmother and told her jokes. SHE DIED LAUGHING!"

"How cliché!" said Prince Charming.

The witch stooped over the corpse and picked up a book. "One-Hundred and One Stepmother Jokes."

Everyone gasped.

I felt like a mouse in a trap. "Listen! I'm not funny! I'm a fantasy fan! I know all of Grimm's Fairy Tales by heart! I own Harry Potter movies on DVD! I've read *Lord of the Rings* twice! And . . . and . . . I've even had one of my stories selected for a writing challenge in *Profound Enchantment*."

Suddenly, the wicked witch let out an ear-piercing scream and staggered backward. "I'm

melting!" she wailed. "I'm m -e - l - t - i - n - g."

And sure enough, she did.

I looked around, bewildered and afraid, as the group of fairy tale characters slowly closed in around me, mumbling in unbelief, "The wicked witch is dead. The wicked witch is dead."

"I-I don't understand. Why did she melt? How did I kill her?"

"You said the magic words," Doc explained.

"Yeah. Why don't you just throw a bucket of water in her face next time?" Tinkerbell sneered.

"Magic words. What magic words?" I asked.

"Profound Enchantment. Those two words are enough to strike fear into the hearts of all or melt a wicked witch—whichever comes first."

"But why?" I cried. "Why are those words so powerful?"

"Because it is in the realm where EditorWraiths dwell," Doc explained.

"EditorWraiths?"

"Yes. Grammar kings of old. Neither living nor dead, they fly around on magic mouse pads searching, always searching."

"Searching. Searching for what?" I asked in a frightened whisper.

"Weak plots and shallow characters," Doc told me.

Weak plots. Shallow characters. Boy, was I in trouble!

"But that's not all. EditorWraiths exist only to serve the One Master."

"The One Master?" I asked fearfully.

Doc bent forward and whispered hoarsely, "You Know Who."

I shook my head. "No. I don't."

Doc leaned even closer. "You know."

"Who?" I asked.

"Right," said Doc. "He is a Great Editing Master. Some say he has the one key to rule them all. The **DELETE KEY!**"

Editorwraiths. . . The Great Editing Master. They held our fates in their hands. It was too much to take! My knees felt weak. My head swam. Everything blurred.

Mother Hubbard saw my distress and patted my hand. "There. There."

Sneezy broke in with a question. "Hey Doc, if the wicked witch is melted who's gunna ask the questions now?"

Doc looked at the corpse and then around at the innocent faces turned his way. He made up his mind.

"There's no need for any more questions," he announced. "It quite apparent that none of us killed her."

"Yes, yes. Quite so." They all nodded in approval.

But I couldn't believe my ears. "How can you say that? Just because the witch isn't here to ask questions, doesn't mean that we can just blow the whole thing off. We still have a murder on our hands."

But Doc wasn't listening; he had an illegal diamond mine to get back to. "I think we would be quite right in concluding that the cause of Stepmother's death was . . ." all faces turned toward him in anticipation, ". . .suicide."

"Suicide! Suicide!" I pointed to the corpse. "How can this be suicide? She was hit over the head with a bone, burned in an oven, swept off her feet, strangled by a rope of hair, poisoned by an apple, pricked on the finger with a spindle, run over by an enchanted pumpkin, covered in

fatal fairy dust, joked to death, and . . . and a house fell on her!"

"She has a point there, Doc," Sleepy said, prodding the victim with a stick. "Are you sure she's really dead?"

"Of course she's dead." Doc poked the dead body with the toe of his boot. "Dead as a door nail. Eeeeewww, she's got one of those stuck in her too. Definitely suicide."

But I wasn't giving up so easily. I didn't come all the way down here in the middle of the night and melt a witch for nothing. In fact, I could be downright tenacious if a situation called for it, and this one did. I wasn't letting go for nothing. No, not me.

"How can it be suicide?" I demanded.

Grumpy gave me an exasperated look and yelled, "THIS IS FANTASY! Use your imagination!"

"Oh. Ok." I couldn't speak for the others, but I sure was convinced. Suicide it was.

I yawned. "Now that everything is settled, I really need to get home."

"There's no place like home," Dorothy said.

"Sweet dreams," said Sleeping Beauty.

"Hi ho. Hi ho. It's off to bed you go," cried the dwarves.

"May you live happily ever after," said Prince Charming.

Cinderella advised, "Be home by twelve or you'll turn into a . . ." And as all faces turned toward her with questioning looks, she shrugged. "Never mind. It might be an improvement."

* * *

The golden chariot whisked me back to snowy Iowa and the comfort of my own bed.

My husband stopped snoring long enough to mumble, "Where have you been? You were gone so long, I thought maybe you had been abducted by aliens."

"Good God, no!" I responded. "*That* would be sci-fi."

The End

Jean Schneider (a.k.a. Jean Meyer) lives in the beautiful Iowa countryside with her husband and four children. When she's not busy homeschooling her children, she loves to garden, play chess, read, and write the occasional story.

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thought. The heaviness in my belly told me I shouldn't rely on anyone coming to rescue me.

I went to work on my bonds then. But with numb fingers, the ropes might as well have been chains. Whoever had left me here intended that I never get away.

I chewed this over. Who would want me this way?

I strained. Sweat coated my brow again.

Nothing came to me at all.

I mean, I didn't know who I was, where I came from or why I ended up here.

Panic once more washed through me. And again I reacted violently. I shoved my fear away permanently this time, brutally grinding it to the consistency of the sand I lay on. When it disappeared, I felt better, like I had triumphed.

The tide lapped at my shoes and brought me back to my situation. Soon it would reach the seawall. I followed the stone courses upward with my eyes. The high water mark discolored a row well above my head, even when sitting.

All in all it was a beautiful night to die. Above the sea, stars splashed across a frosty sky, and the moon rode the water like a ship at anchor. I suppose I should have prepared myself for death as well as anyone can. But when I said it was a beautiful night to die, I meant for someone else.

I forced my back against the wall and began scraping my bonds against its rough rock. I had been at it for a good while. My muscles ached. The sea now soaked my shoes and jeans. Only a narrow ribbon of dry land remained and very little time to save myself. I had no idea how far I had progressed toward freedom, if, in fact, I was anywhere close.

I bent to redouble my efforts, when I heard feet splashing in the water. Be still, cautioned that savage part of me. It seemed the wisest course, so I feigned unconsciousness.

Two men walked up— Filthy Leather Boots and Barefeet, calloused like a sailor's.

"You've got good eyes, mate, spotting him here in this light," said one.

"Balls! He's as big as Lord Qweg himself," replied the other.

A laugh and Boots kicked sand in my face. "He's harmless enough, trussed like a pig for the spit."

I gasped and nearly gave myself away when I realized they weren't speaking English but I understood them anyway. I covered my surprise with a low moan.

"Hurry, get him back to the ship 'fore he wakes. With his size, he'll fetch a good price."

Where? This place? Or would I be carried like cargo to another port?

Boots moved to my feet, and hands lifted me by my shoulders and ankles. The bonds gave slightly then. But it was enough. I flexed my wrists with all my strength and the rope snapped.

Before either of them realized I was free, I grabbed the man at my shoulders by the forearms and stabbed my fingers deeply into the tendons of his wrists. He cried out and let go. I hung on and, drawing my legs back, kicked the other one in the face. He slammed against the stonewall and fell unconscious.

My bound feet hit the sand with a thud that jarred my spine. The first man desperately tried to shake my grip. I squeezed harder and the bones in his forearms snapped. He screamed and fell as I tumbled into the surf.

By the time I heaved my body above the surface, gasping for air, Barefeet was already stumbling down the shore, crying out. Lights flickered to life on a darkened ship at the nearest wharf. Voices hallooed at him. Soon, men ran along the dock toward the shore.

I lunged out of the water next to the other man and grabbed the knife at his belt. My fingers were wooden and it took me several seconds to slice through the bonds at my legs. By now

a dozen men intercepted the man whose arms I had broken. His chin jutted in my direction.

Loathe to run, an unreasoning violence possessed me. I wanted to make all of them suffer for what they had planned for me. But better judgment prevailed; I was one, armed with only a knife, against a dozen who carried cutlasses and belaying pins.

I stood ungracefully on numbed feet and lurched dizzily against the seawall for support. It rose over eighteen hands high, yet my head easily topped it. Looking landward, I saw taverns facing the harbor. They carved the night with light and the faint noise of sailors and music.

I doubted I would find any refuge there.

Lanterns along the quay marked the mouths of roads disappearing into a rustic city of wood and stone buildings. If I could make it across the way, I might be able to hide within the warren of alleys and roads.

I climbed the wall, cursing when I barked my shin against the top course of stone. Hobbling across the sea road, I headed up the first street I came to.

Behind me slavers were already scrambling over the wall. Feeling was returning to my feet but each step was agony and soon the men would overtake me.

The way wound sharply upward. I passed several buildings, their windows casting latticed squares of light onto the cobbled street. I reached an alley.

"This way," a voice hissed.

My knife flashed between us. I spotted a shadow of a dress. It shifted and a young girl with long hair filled it.

Either the girl didn't see my blade or she didn't care. Her hand beckoned and she said, "Those slavers will be here any second. If you want to stay free, you'll come with me."

Already I could hear them at the bottom of the street I had entered. I nodded and followed her. Crates and refuse filled the narrow alley; my nose rebelled at the stench of rotting offal and urine. I was very glad I could not see where I stepped.

We squeezed between a pair of wooden barrels and some stacked crates. On the other side she did something to the wall of an ancient building

"In here," she whispered, as a faded section swung inward noiselessly.

I gestured with the knife. "After you."

She turned toward me and I caught her face in a sliver of moonlight. She was maybe twelve years old, pretty, a touch of makeup, the dress clean and new looking. It revealed the tops of bone colored shoulders and a budding décolletage. Her teeth were pointed and white. She laughed as though she played some kind of game. I suppose it would be to children.

I could hear the footsteps of many men coming from the street we had just left. I didn't have time to question why a well-dressed, little girl snuck around in alleys at this time of night. I pushed past her and we entered the room.

She closed the camouflaged door after us. I heard the snick of a bolt sliding home.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked.

"Shhh!" she answered.

I listened. Nothing at first, and then the sounds of crates being turned aside, the barrels knocked over. I readied myself as best I could. The tingling had left my feet, and I knew I would take several of the bastards with me if they found her hideaway, but after a few moments and curses, the footsteps went away and silence prevailed.

A chuckle in the blackness behind me. I swiveled around and saw my benefactress lighting an oil lamp. The room was the size of a large closet, big enough for a bed and a small table. No chairs. No doors, save the one to the alley.

The girl was short and skinny. Red hair fell across muscled shoulders, not from carrying heavy loads like a fishmonger's daughter, but like a gymnast's. The shaft of light from the lamp revealed a young face. The eyes, gray with flecks of green in them, were not children's eyes, but old and mindful. A fleeting certainty that I knew them flashed through my mind, though nothing in the fragments of my memory available helped me place her.

She eyed me up and down in the dim light; a half smile played across her face. "You look like Qweg himself."

That name again. It meant nothing to me, but I did not let on to her my ignorance.

"So I've been told," I said with a touch of irony. "Not that the resemblance has helped me lately."

"I'll bet it hasn't." She laughed easily. She blew out the match with an air that said she was accustomed to being alone with men. I wondered if hooking was how the young girl made her living. It would explain the clothes, the makeup and especially the ancient understanding in her eyes.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked.

She scowled and spat on the floor. "At seven, slavers captured my family and sold us in Thereon's slave market. I managed to escape and stay free. I work now for a trader."

"Convenient that," my suspicious self said.

Her face flushed angrily and the green flecks of her eyes smoldered with the fierce resentment of a child. For a moment I thought she would leave. Instead, she lifted the hem of her skirt past her thigh. An old factor's mark had been branded across a scrawny hip and buttocks.

"It wasn't so convenient."

I flushed and turned away, motioning her to lower the dress. A great anger filled me that someone would do this to a child. At the same time I realized just how important it was that I remain free. I wanted to find the person or persons who dumped me at the water's edge, waiting for the incoming tide to drown me. And when I found the people responsible for my predicament, I would destroy them and their families.

The same murderous violence that urged me against the slavers gripped me again. I looked down and saw I had twisted the knife blade in my hand. A thin red line appeared in the skin. With a great effort, I controlled my fury. I pressed my palm against my pants until the bleeding stopped.

When I could speak calmly again, I turned around. Her dress once more skimmed the floor.

I looked at her and said, "I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "It gives me incentive to help slaves escape. Besides, the pain vanished years ago."

I suspected the last wasn't true, but I let the matter drop.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Morgan."

The name could have sounded familiar, though perhaps I was just grasping at straws, anything to help me gain control of my situation. But even with the eyes I couldn't place it within my memory.

"Well, Morgan, where do we go from here?"

Her eyes narrowed and in that moment she looked very adult. "That depends on you. Right now this area isn't safe."

I looked at her questioningly.

"Slavers don't like it when one of their property escapes. They won't rest until they find you. The trader I work for sometimes helps slaves leave Thereon. If you want his help, you'll have to trust me to get you out of here."

Trust was a huge word at this point. I didn't know any of the rules of the game, or the hand I played, or any of the players. At any time one of them could thrust a knife in my guts and I would have no way of seeing it coming. On the other hand, there wasn't any other game in town. I would just have to be cagey and play like I knew what was happening.

I nodded. I was about to ask her what the next move was when a soft tapping from the alley interrupted. I whirled and drew my knife. I flicked a glance toward her.

She stiffened and then the rhythm repeated. She relaxed.

"A friend," she said. Even so, she motioned me into a corner.

The wall swung open. I heard whispers but could make out no words. Moments later, she motioned me to stay put and left.

* * *

There didn't seem to be anything else to do but wait. I walked to the table and into the light. Sand itched my scalp and neck and covered my clothes. I brushed it away and this simple action startled me. The clothes I wore —blue jeans, white T-shirt, Nike sneakers— were nothing like those worn by the slavers or Morgan.

Something told me also that I wasn't a Calvin Klein kind of guy either. I jerked in surprise a second time remembering the name. It seemed to make sense for the jeans but was out of place here. After a moment's reflection, I realized the clothes didn't add anything to figuring out my identity or where I hailed from—except that it was different than this place, wherever this place was —or who had dumped me at the water's edge, waiting for the incoming tide to drown me. For the moment, I filed them under paradox: I was in a place different from a world I was accustomed to, yet strangely, this new one was somehow familiar. I recognized the sailing ships, the medieval style architecture and the clothing of the inhabitants. I did not feel out of place or out of time so much as surprised that I should be here.

I checked out the pockets of the jeans. One held a handkerchief. No monogram. From the right front I pulled out a torn scrap of closely woven, linen paper. I examined it and I could make out the watermark of a jester's cap with tiny bells imprinted in one corner. Foolscap! Yet another anomaly—Renaissance paper in modern clothing. I shook my head. More clues to be put aside until I had enough information to figure out what they all meant.

Someone had signed Merlin Skye on the other side of the paper. At least, I assumed it was a signature. The 'M' and 'S' had been capitalized in a flourishing style, such as an educated person might affect. The rest of the letters followed hurriedly like a man signing a memo.

I studied the scrawl until my mind winced with frustration. Nothing. The name evoked no images of friends or enemies.

Above the signature a fragment of a sentence read "...Shuttle vanished; I must find it!"

Shuttle? Did it mean some kind of commuter shuttle? Or a space shuttle? Was that how I arrived at this place? Neither seemed likely since they did not fit with the galleons in the harbor. The words suggested a world far different from this one. But one I could not entirely recall —only fuzzy pictures that did not make much sense.

Dead ends every way I turned. I ran my fingers through my hair, long and wild like a goat's, brushing out the last of the sand. Though I knew my amnesia might reverse itself at any

moment from some unseen stimulus, I also knew the possibility existed my memories might never return, and I would remain stranded in this medieval world without any knowledge of my name, or how I came to be here. Without any hope of ever returning to my own time and place.

I clenched my fists and slammed them against the table. The cut opened again. I took the handkerchief from my pocket and wrapped my hand with it. Violence hovered on the edge of my consciousness.

I forced myself to be calm and examined this terrible fury that seemed to erupt from me when I felt wronged or put upon by others. It did not have the texture of a mechanism such as self preservation. I was simply incensed. No one could treat me this way because I, of all people, did not deserve it. I sensed most strongly that this specialness, which defined me, went beyond that which might be bestowed upon rulers. Not merely a king, I embodied something much more.

What? I tried to conjure it. I knew it must be a part of my identity, possibly even the key. But nothing came of my exertions. That something remained lost to me.

For now I would have to keep my rage in check. I could not afford to let it control me, or it might destroy whatever chances I had of regaining my memories and dealing with the enemies who had left me to become a slave. The corners of my mouth turned up in a grim smile at this thought, for I knew that I would enjoy letting my fury loose upon them. In the meantime, I would discipline myself to stay detached.

* * *

The alley door opened and Morgan appeared, carrying a small bundle. Wisps of gray silhouetted her.

"The night fog is coming in. We'll be able to leave in a few minutes," she said.

"Where are we going?"

"To my employer's home."

I didn't need to think this over. Staying here wasn't an option, and her suggestion seemed as good a plan as any. I nodded.

"You can't go about dressed the way you are, even with the night fog. Someone might notice."

She threw the bundle at me.

I opened it and found motley clothes, the kind a seafarer would wear, boots and a charcoal-colored cloak.

She turned toward the door, which she left partly ajar when she entered, and checked the alley.

I dressed quickly. The pants and shirt fit reasonably well. I slipped on the pair of boots and was pleasantly surprised and immediately leery.

"The boots," I began.

"They're a good fit?" she asked over her shoulder.

"They're perfect," I said and let irony slip into my voice.

She turned toward me. Her shoulders shrugged and that adultness showed itself again.

"Luck," she said. "Finish dressing. The fog won't last long and we have to move quickly."

I nodded. Perhaps I was being too dubious. Possibly sheer luck brought me boots that fit as well as they did.

Even so, I waited until she turned away before I slid the knife into the boot and the fragment of paper with it. The name Merlin and the message were the only clues I had, and I

wasn't willing to let her or anyone else know about them. The cloak went over everything and its hood concealed my features nicely.

"I'm ready," I said.

She left her post and inspected me. Satisfied, she took a cloak from a peg beside the makeshift door and slipped outside.

I followed her.

Chapter Two

The night had grown cooler. A dense fog hugged the ground and rose to building height. Morgan took my hand and we threaded through the alley to the street. She walked up the steep hill, away from the quay and its noisy music. We pressed close to buildings, their dark shadows looming like caverns in the grayness. From ahead, we heard muffled curses and she pulled me into a doorway. The dull glow of a lantern passed ten feet from us, hovered in the gloom a moment. Morgan buried herself against me, like a child would.

I could feel her ragged breath against my chest, and I eased my hand toward my knife and waited. Snide laughter, and the light moved on.

We continued upward. We did not run, but a quiet hurriedness marked our pace. Occasional lampposts cast streamers of pallid light through the heavy mist. She turned left through an alley, and a hundred steps later, right again over a causeway. Right. Straight. Left. Doubling back. I soon lost all direction, and we might as well have been in a maze.

The sounds of the harbor faded as we climbed above the heavy fog and left the city. We walked along a wide boulevard, our swift passage sending tendrils of fine mist swirling in our wake. We passed homes, brightly lit and with rich facades, placed well away from the road behind fences and gates topped with soaring ornamental iron work. At the crest of a hill, we entered an estate through an elaborately filigreed gate with a huge letter 'M' in the center. The watchman came out of the gate house. Morgan whispered something and he doffed his cap and waved us on our way. We proceeded along a curving drive lined with large trees, their limbs heavy with leaves and drooping like loose folds of silvery cloth. The moist night air carried a strong smell of horses.

The front of the home blazed with light from a half dozen lanterns. We skirted it and slid along the side until we reached a narrow portico near the back. A dim lamp outlined a solid oak door at the top of the stairs.

Morgan paused outside the entrance, her hand resting on a bell pull beside it. She tugged the rope twice, waited a pair of heartbeats and tugged once more. Within seconds the door opened. We hurried inside where a sleepy young mulatto boy, holding a small candle, closed the door after us.

"Go back to bed, Solomon," she said.

He vanished into the pantry.

She led me through a kitchen lit only by dull red gleams from the stove. It smelled of grease and cooked meat and it reminded me that I was famished. We crossed a foyer. Overhead, elaborate candelabra illuminated walls of a light wood, speckled with knots like tiny birds' eyes, and a floor of sworled ebony and alabaster-colored marble. We went up two flights of stairs and

down another hall, also lit, carpeted in exotic designs. Half-way, she entered a room without knocking. Gloom veiled the chamber even though three sets of windows climbed the far wall to the ceiling and let in a gray, mist-shrouded light. She left my side and I saw her shadow moving through the room. She seemed familiar with it. Moments later, two oil lamps flared to life. She stood near a large desk with a high-backed chair behind. The lamps turned the windows into mirrors and she quickly drew drapes to cover them.

Only when we were safe did she throw her hood back and let out her breath in a long sigh.

"We'll be protected here."

I nodded.

"I'll fetch my employer," she added.

"Is that necessary?" I asked, perhaps a bit too quickly. But dammit, until I reckoned the score, the fewer people who knew of my existence in this world the better.

She giggled, nothing I would have expected from a girl who had snatched me from slavers in a squalid alleyway less than an hour before.

"Macbeth will want to meet you."

She said his name as though I should recognize it. I decided not to disappoint her.

"I am surprised a man as important as Macbeth would take time to meet runaways."

"He insists on meeting all the people I rescue from the slave docks."

I had the feeling, maybe from the tone of her voice, that I had best be sharp when Macbeth appeared. So I said, trying to draw her out a bit, "I wasn't technically a slave yet. I don't see how I could be of any interest to him. In fact, it would be simpler to let me go and let me make my own way."

She mulled this over.

"I'm sure he'll want to meet you, anyway. There's something different about you, not like the usual slaves I save. The way you look, as though hiding a romantic secret of some kind." She clapped her hands like a schoolgirl. "I think that's why I decided to rescue you."

I smiled and said the safest thing that came to mind. "I'm the black sheep of the family. We're always a bit mysterious."

She smiled back, this time in an odd way, and those old eyes looked at me as though she knew something about me. I could not ask her about it, though, without disclosing that I didn't know anything about me. It occurred to me that I could not afford to appear frail to anyone or else I would be at their mercy, a quality, it seemed, in scant supply.

She dropped the matter. Carrying one of the lamps, she went over to the far end of the room and opened a door onto a small but clean washroom.

"Clean yourself up," she ordered.

I bristled at her tone but kept my anger hidden. I reminded myself that whatever my own perception of self worth, here, judging by this wealthy home, Macbeth was in a position to help me. It would do me no good to antagonize one of his servants.

Returning the lamp to the desk, she stopped in front of a hearth and lit a fire, already set, before leaving and closing the door behind her.

The pleasant smell of wood smoke reached me and I relaxed. I drew off my cloak and, fetching one of the lamps, went into the bathroom where I found a basin of water, a washcloth, a hairbrush, razor and soap. Someone had also provided a coarse brush with short stiff hairs for my teeth. I sighed and added a beatification to the person who had been so thoughtful.

I washed the last of the sand and dirt from my face. Patting myself dry with a thick towel, I studied the unfamiliar visage staring back at me in the beveled mirror: gray eyes, a slightly

hooked nose above large black drooping mustachios partially covering full lips; long, goatish hair fell against broad shoulders. I grinned fiercely, revealing white teeth that stood out against the darkness of my skin like polished ivory. I obviously had taken care of myself over the years.

Though I stared at my features for a long period of time, they brought back no memories. This was my face. At least, I believed it was my face.

Something by my right eye caught my attention when I blinked. Brushing aside thick strands of hair, I saw a tiny quarter moon tattoo, facing dexter, hardly bigger than the tip of my little finger. I traced the silvery blue crescent. It pulsed as though a great deal of energy were passing through it. However, when I pressed on it, I touched nothing but skin. After a while, its intensity subsided, though it remained distinct.

Someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to mark me. Perhaps I had been a slave. I instantly dismissed that thought. I exhibited no slave mannerisms, either sullenness or fawning behavior. I would bow to no man for any reason. And if a man struck me, he would be dead by my hands before he could strike again.

No, the tattoo meant something special, I thought. In fact, I had the distinct conviction that I should not be ashamed of it. It signified a kind of honor, a symbol for a very exclusive fraternity.

Next, I unwrapped the handkerchief from my hand. The wound was already healing over and I figured I must not have cut myself very deeply. Folding the handkerchief, I put it in my pocket. I finished washing, brushed my teeth, combed my hair. Back in the study I found a short piece of ribbon and tied back the unruly strands. I did not like them dangling against my cheeks, and for some reason, I decided Macbeth needed to see the crescent moon.

I walked around the room —chestnut paneling with an ornate plaster molded ceiling. The elegant drapes had been woven from a thick, fine wool to keep out the night chill. Books in a peculiar script lined one entire wall. A wealthy man's study. I had never been here before. This was not a guess. Nothing about this room made me question whether I knew it.

Beside the bookcases, a pair of rapiers crossed above the fireplace. I still had the knife from the slaver, but a sword would place a bit more distance between me and my enemies. I took one down and slashed the air with it a few times. The balance and grip seemed good. Not perfect for my hand but it would do well enough until . . . I nearly let the sword fall from my grasp. A bit of memory returned then, not of the mind, but muscle memory. My wrist and forearm remembered the feel of a very special blade that had been forged for me. With it I transformed into a demon during combat. I strained to revive more until my mind hurt, but no further remembrances disclosed themselves. I went to put the sword back and decided instead to keep it. I felt strangely naked without it near me.

I continued around the room and came to the desk. It was large, oak and strewn with papers. The chair was leather and cushioned. I sighed into it with the ease of a man accustomed to this kind of luxury. I refrained from putting my feet up, though.

Laying down the sword, I studied the papers. The top sheet was all figures written in a neat clerk's hand. So were the next and the next. The fourth one down was a letter. I studied the handwriting. I did not recognize it. I don't know that I really expected to, though I hoped for something to jog my memory along. It seemed too much of a coincidence that Morgan found me and brought me to this home and into this study. I did not believe in coincidences; at least my cagey self told me that to do so would shorten my life span considerably.

All the unknowns weighed heavily against me. I needed rest, food and time to consider my position and what to do next. But I wasn't given any time to mull over my circumstances. The

door handle jiggled. I hastily put the paper back with the others. I left the rapier on the desk and checked that the knife in my boot was readily accessible. There was no place to move without looking guilty, so I sat behind the desk, staring coldly at the door as it opened.

A scarecrow of a man entered. He wore a plumed hat; sun-bleached hair jutted beneath it in thick singular strands like pieces of straw. An open cloak, clasped at his throat with a silver spider, draped him. He was dressed expensively in a ruffled, green shirt and fine leggings. A saber hung at his side. Like Odin returning from the well of the fates, his wizened face blazoned a single gold eye, which snapped quickly about the room before returning to rest, finally, on me. A violet patch covered the right eye socket.

Macbeth, I presumed. I did not know him by sight, yet I recognized him —as I would Shakespeare's Thane— to be a dangerous and violent man, well schooled in the arts of martial combat, or my instincts were as addled as my memory. I did not think so. The things that I knew instinctively —the language Morgan and the slavers spoke, my sense of superiority— told me otherwise.

Purple lips drew back in a thin sneer when he spotted me in his chair. As quickly as it appeared, his scorn faded and for a moment he looked puzzled. He started when he saw the crescent moon tattoo beside my eye. Then, with a grand gesture, he dropped to one knee, his hat held wide and his head bowed.

"My Lord Qweg," he intoned.

Qweg! Again. I did not know the name Qweg, except that it had been mentioned by one of the slavers on the beach and by Morgan as a joke. Now I rolled it around in my mind, trying it on for size. I had the impression that it was half a name somehow. Still, perhaps I was this Lord Qweg, or looked enough like him that I could pull off his impersonation. I fell in with the title's distinction easily enough, though, and summoning all the kingly mannerisms I could think of, I motioned Macbeth to rise.

His voice remained subservient and yet betrayed a touch of intimacy as he hastily added, "Morgan did not say it was you she had brought here. Had I known, I would have arranged a more suitable welcome."

I said, "Under the circumstances of my arrival, I did not think it wise to tell her my real name."

I would have gone on, but at that moment, from my position behind the desk, I saw something that took my breath away. Several tapestries braced the wall on either side of the door my host kneeled in. One gleamed like a living thing. I trembled and electricity shot through my spine. For the moment I forgot Macbeth. I rose quickly and brushed by him for a closer inspection.

He asked, "Is something wrong, my Lord?"

I didn't answer.

A piece of memory surfaced—one I could be sure of—a fleeting vision of a castle that glowed like the heart of a crystal. While I descended through that quilted sky, I recalled seeing a grand palace —minarets and floating bridges of white stone— set against a backdrop of a dark brooding mountain. The remembrance was startling, in brilliant detail like a scene in a painting. I knew this place, like a man might know his own home, had been inside its glittering walls. And now the scene unfolded on a tapestry in Macbeth's study.

I struggled to recall its name and then it came to me.

Enion!

The name arose from some deep part of me as though out of my flesh and not my mind.

Enion belonged to me. I knew this in the way my chest swelled and my legs no longer felt tired as I gazed upon its iridescent splendor. I could have stared at the weaving for hours. My fondness for its subject nearly overwhelmed me, and I almost wept, thinking of its sweeps of polished stone and shimmering towers.

An urgent need to stand within its walls once more grew steadily within me, for I knew this too: here lay the key to my identity. If not for the fatigue buried deep in my sinews, I would have started out for the kingdom this evening.

I was suddenly conscious of the man beside me who now must be wondering at my silent enthrallment with this tapestry.

"This arras," I said, not bothering to keep the rasp from my voice, "captures Enion in all its glory."

"My Lord is very kind," Macbeth replied. "It is one of the master weaver Graymalkin's works."

Graymalkin? Another name without meaning to me.

"He *is* a great weaver," I acknowledged, meaning it, though something odd about this tapestry troubled me; something that the dim light of the oil lamps did not reveal. I resolved to come back during the day when I could study it more closely.

"I had it made especially for this room to remind me that though I live here in Thereon, Enion is the center of all the worlds," Macbeth added.

For a moment I thought I detected a note of irony in his voice, but when I turned to face him, his face was all genial and even that single yellow orb looked at me benignly.

"So it is," I answered.

"If my Lord desires, you shall have the weaving immediately."

Macbeth moved to summon a servant and I stopped him.

"That won't be necessary. It just reminded me of home."

Macbeth nodded.

"Of course. You are a long way from Enion." He then asked, "Have you eaten yet?"

"No." And this time I could not keep the weariness from my voice.

He called out to Morgan, who must have been standing just outside the door for she appeared instantly. He ordered food. He closed the door and motioned me to resume my seat.

I shook my head. "I won't unseat a friend in his own house," I declared.

He looked at me peculiarly, and I knew that Qweg would never have had any such reservations. I brassed it out.

"A friend who has saved me from slavery deserves consideration."

I retrieved the rapier from the desk, for I did not care for the uneven quality of our roles, he being well armed and I not, and took a chair near the fireplace, warming myself against the night chill, which had managed to seep through the heavy drapes.

"It has been a while since we ate together," Macbeth observed.

"It has been some time," I agreed, wondering if we were close friends who dined together whenever I visited Thereon. I did not believe this true, even though I called him friend. Amnesia or no, the room just did not feel right to me. It was not a place I would have frequented. At that moment I realized that the quality of our relationship did not matter. I could not afford any intimacy given my situation. I would have to remain sharp, to take his measure while giving little of myself. "Circumstances have kept me busy."

"Yet here you are at last, arrived by a circuitous route, no guards, no fanfare . . . hardly befitting Enion's ruler."

I noticed then that his voice had a peculiar quality, sounding like a raven's. It seemed to match his scarecrow-like appearance and added to the menace, which lay just beneath his solicitous surface.

I shrugged.

"I prefer to travel without fanfare, as you put it," I replied, knowing as I said this that I bespoke another true part of myself. I had a great care for secrecy in my arrivals and departures. How I entered and left Enion unnoticed or even why I chose to do so, I had no idea. Even as I understood this, though, a forbidding suspicion began gnawing within me.

"I am merely concerned, my Lord," Macbeth continued. "Such travel is especially hazardous in Thereon."

A smile played tag at the corners of his mouth. I wondered if that smile knew more about my circumstances in the harbor than it let on.

"All travel is dangerous at times," I laughed. "Besides, it can be just as dangerous to stay in one place."

He laughed with me. Then, "How is it that my Lord nearly came to be the property of slavers this evening?"

I didn't know the answer to that, but I made up a satisfactory story that came easily to me. I guessed this facility meant that in my life beyond this world, I excelled at pretense.

"I suppose you should know some of what happened since you are indirectly responsible for my rescue. I left Enion on a mission concerning her security. In my travels highwaymen ambushed me at a place not too far from Thereon's borders. They must have drugged me, for I remember nothing else until I awoke below the harbor's seawall."

I took a pair of fire tongs and toyed with the fire. I had to turn away from him. My earlier suspicion now sent a chill into my testicles. I realized that I had no recollection of how to get back to Enion, nor even in which direction she lay. I struggled to remember until my head throbbed and the back of my neck grew hot. The way remained unknown to me and an appalling realization descended upon me—I would not be able to return unless I laid out my debility to someone. But who could I trust to guide me home?

When I thought my face would no longer betray my emotions, I swiveled toward him and changed the subject.

"Strange for a little girl to be at the docks. I would think you would not let a servant leave the house at night."

"Whatever gave my Lord the idea that Morgan is a servant?"

"She told me she worked for you."

He made an odd, chirruping laugh. "Morgan is my ward, with a will of her own. Her appearance is deceiving. She has the wits of a man three times her age, and when it comes to rescuing runaways, she has more reason than others to succeed. My Lord is not the first person she and her gang of little friends have rescued from Thereon's slave block."

I remembered the brand on her thigh and agreed with his assessment.

"Still, it seems dangerous to let the child risk being recaptured by slavers."

"She enjoys protection here because of my position in Thereon."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I provide a certain amount of stability to the . . . merchant community. All of the slave traders are making money. In exchange, they don't begrudge the occasional missing piece of property."

"Funny that. Morgan seems to think they would stop at nothing to get back a stolen item."

He laughed his curious laugh. “My ward has no idea what it is I do. Which is just as well. Given her background, she might not approve of my . . . business interests.” —I know I did not, though I was in no position to voice my objection— “Meanwhile, she requires a certain amount of romanticism in her life and I indulge her. It is the least that I can do since she is very special to me.”

His tone suggested some uncommon bond between them. However, the food came, forestalling any more talk on the subject.

Papers were pushed aside to make room for a whole beef brisket, crusty loaves of bread and a skin of wine laid out on the desk’s surface. Morgan served us. Afterwards, Macbeth nodded to his ward and she departed, but not before curtsying to me and apologizing for her familiarity when we first met. I waved her apology away.

When the room cleared, I fell upon my portion with a tremendous hunger and demolished it.

Macbeth ate fastidiously, like a bird of prey, tearing small slivers of meat from the carcass. All the while he watched me with that single golden hawk’s eye but never said a word. Under other circumstances, it might have been chilling. But my appetite drove everything else from my mind.

When I sopped up the last of the blood drippings with the final crust of bread and stuffed it into my mouth, I sat back replete.

“What next does your Lordship, desire?” Macbeth asked.

“I’ve lost my pipe,” I said, buying time.

He tugged on a bell pull. Morgan appeared immediately, and Macbeth sent her for a pipe and tobacco. While she was gone, he poured more wine.

She returned a few minutes later with a plainly carved meerschaum that looked old and well used. Again she left, this time without saying a word. I picked up the pipe and twirled it unconsciously between my fingers and nearly let it fall from my grasp. I remembered the feel of a very special pipe that fit my hand perfectly just like this one did. I covered my surprise by making a bit of a fuss stuffing this one while I strained to recall more. Nothing surfaced. Finally I drew it to smoke, and the pleasant taste of ganja filled my mouth and relaxed me. About six percent of tetrahydra canabinois, I judged by the genial buzz growing in my head. If Macbeth thought to fog my brain with the hallucinogen, he was going to be disappointed. I recalled smoking weed in my other life—wherever that was—usually when engaged in a creative endeavor. Probably music, for the fragrance invoked sounds of jazz in the background.

Once more I stilled the urge to gasp outloud. The word jazz was another part of my past that clashed with this world. Since awakening, a lot of unusual words and images had come to me that did not fit the place in which I found myself. Until I had a better idea of who I was and where I came from, I would have to let them go as anomalies of my mind. Otherwise, baffled by their sudden intrusions, I would think of little else. So I placed jazz with all the others in a compartment of their own, and concentrated on my pipe. Soon ribbons of the aromatic smoke competed with the fire.

While waiting, I had sipped at the wine and chewed on all that I had learned this evening. The name Thereon had puzzled me from the first time I heard it, tied up on the beach. And now I remembered. It was the center for a slave trade network that reached far across the wine-red waters of the Ispian Sea. Macbeth, as its foremost trader, wielded the true power in this city. My standing as Lord Qweg, ruler of Enion, might not serve me well here, if he desired otherwise. Or, if he discovered my memory loss, he could use me as a tool in whatever plots he had hatching.

Either way, the ball had to stay in his court as much as possible or the remainder of the evening would not turn out well for me.

I cleared my throat and Macbeth picked up the cue as I hoped he would.

"How are things in Enion?"

"Stable. It stays the same no matter I am there or not."

"You are fortunate that Adella rules wisely in your absence."

I drew on my pipe so that I did not have to answer right away, and I watched a blue wreath of smoke rise into the room. In my mind 'Adella' was mixed up with hazy images in shades of the rainbow and amber and gold. I knew her but not our connection—sister or daughter, consort or wife . . . friend or enemy.

Macbeth eyed me over the rim of his glass. It was curious, that eye. In another man it would have been hideous. In Macbeth it was dangerous . . . a raptor's stare that could freeze a rabbit, killing it even before the talons struck. How would Lord Qweg act to this man's probing gaze? How should I act in his place? It occurred to me that I did not care to endure the scrutiny of any man, friend or otherwise. My violent self boiled just below the surface, but, remembering my resolve, I forced myself to relax in my chair and returned his gaze blandly.

I figured he had not chosen his words idly. He did not mean to threaten this woman; he was asking after something else.

I smiled then. Fortune favors the bold.

"I am lucky in the people who govern for me when I am not in Enion. They rule well and strongly. And, I am certain they eagerly await my safe return."

He poured himself another glass of wine.

"In my business luck is not as important as foresight and suspicion."

"That goes without saying, or you would not occupy the position you do."

"I am glad that you understand that." He put down his wine glass. "What are your plans here in Thereon, my Lord?" he asked, his tone blunt.

I shrugged. "Though my arrival was not as I expected, I find that I like to visit other realms."

"Thereon is a far cry from Enion. Without your troops, it isn't exactly safe."

"Jesse Helms could not have said it better."

"Who?"

I waved his question away.

"The power of Enion travels with me," and I added, forcing glibness into my voice. "Besides, surely old friends would see to my safety."

He said bleakly, "Sometimes, without other assurances, even old friends aren't enough in Thereon."

I nodded knowingly.

I indicated the remains of our feast. "A last meal?"

He smiled.

"It hardly merits that distinction. Let us say that Lord Qweg would have no worries if he were here unofficially."

I returned his smile. "In that case, I will stay on a few days, unofficially, regain my strength and leave."

The last was a bluff. Now that I recalled Adella, I intended to return to Enion immediately. Not that I mistrusted her as a ruler—I had no way of knowing if I could count on her or not—but I believed that in Enion lay the key to my identity. And once I returned to that

realm, I could safely and covertly seek to restore my memories.

Still, the problem remained, I did not know how to get *home*. But I had made up my mind, and doing so, I would act as quickly as possible. I would have to contrive a way to have someone take me.

The last of the ganja burned and the pipe went out.

I said, "Meanwhile, I would not like it known that I am here."

He nodded. "You shall be my guest. What shall I call you?"

I thought of a dozen or so aliases. Only one stood out. I said it to watch his reaction.

"Call me Merlin."

He did not jump, which would have been satisfying as well as enlightening. Nor did he make a move for his blade. That would have given me an excuse to kill him and protect my back, which in spite of his hospitality and offer of protection, felt terribly exposed in his home.

So I said nothing more but faced the fire. I knocked the dottle out of the pipe bowl and turned back. He had not moved but remained as he had been before I mentioned the name. In itself, this rigidness reflected a kind of admission that the name meant something dire to him. Quite possibly it was the name of a business rival or a substantial foe.

"Merlin it is," he repeated.

I rose and stretched "And now I am tired and need to rest."

He summoned Morgan, who led me to a room. After she left, I stood by the window staring into the night. Something slipped into my mind then, a remnant from a world different than this one. The mist had lifted; stars stippled the sky like a Jackson Pollock painting. I thought of fractals-geometric patterns, borne of chaos, found in the smallest objects and repeated through larger and larger magnifications even to infinity. Here I stood, in a strange house on a strange world, wearing a stranger's identity and existing in a reality different from anything familiar or that I could even imagine. In the chaos surrounding the wreckage of my memory, where was the pattern that would make sense of it all?

At this point, images of Enion came to me and I knew she was the place I had to start. Tomorrow I would find someone to guide me to her pleasant shores.

Tiredness gripped me then. I barely managed to undress before I spilled into bed and slept like I fell, without concern.

Chapter Three

I slept and I dreamed.

A slender, graceful minaret, fashioned from pure crystal, rose from a great city. It grew out of the earth, like a tree with enormous roots reaching to the heart of the planet, and thrust skyward without a balcony or a window to blemish its surface. After a thousand feet, it pierced the thin cover of dirty haze that blanketed homes, factories, businesses and lesser skyscrapers. Another thousand feet above the choking smog, under a brilliant sun, a castle of black stone perched aerie-like on the pinnacle. There were four towers, one at each cardinal point of the compass, and within its walls, more towers and a vast courtyard. Pennants bearing a unicorn and lion flew from the battlements.

Flashes of light carved through the morning sky; planes, filled with sightseers gawking at

this wonder of architecture, flew around the Black Castle like bees circling a flower.

A deep groan split the sky, like a mountain bellowing under the weight of all the rock forming it. Moments later, stone rained down. Within seconds, the castle crumbled. A choking cloud of dust and ash filled the air. An enormous boulder shot out of the gloom.

I cried out . . .

And woke up.

My breath came in shallow spurts and sweat coated my skin. About me the air was clear; sunlight filtered through the window and shadow lines of mullions laced the quilt on the bed where I slept. It took a moment to recognize my surroundings. I was at Macbeth's home in the port city of Thereon. This much was real, I knew.

Yet the nightmare remained vivid in my mind like a scene I had witnessed and only now remembered. I wondered if this event was something out of my past. I searched my memory and could recall no disaster of such magnitude.

A dream only, I supposed at the time. Still, its clarity startled me.

I rose and went to the bathroom where I found the same accessories as the night before. I splashed cold water on my face, and this made me feel less apprehensive. I eyed my mustachios and decided to keep them.

Back in the bedroom, someone had replaced the seaman's motley with fine clothes in silver and dark blue colors. An indigo riding cloak, with threads of silver fluttering throughout the weave like gossamers floating on the wind, lay over a chair in place of the plain woolen one. If I had any lingering doubts as to Lord Qweg's importance, they vanished.

I finished dressing and had just gathered the rapier when I heard a faint tapping at my door.

"Lord Qweg?" Morgan's voice called out softly.

"Enter," I said, but my voice cracked. I cursed silently. I still had not shed the nightmare's effects.

The door opened and she stood on the threshold in riding clothes. A gray riding cloak with the cowl pulled over her head draped her diminutive frame.

"Is everything all right? Your voice did not sound well just now."

I took a moment to compose myself. "I'm fine. Just a bad dream."

She laughed knowingly. "I had bad dreams about slavers for months after I escaped and came here. I'm afraid I must have kept Macbeth awake nights worrying about me."

Macbeth did not seem the sort to worry about anyone but himself. I wondered how Morgan would react when she discovered his true involvement in Thereon's affairs. But I didn't mention anything about that. I just murmured agreeably.

She asked gaily, "Will you tell me what it was?"

I found myself drawn to her girlish innocence. Gone the shadowy mystery of last night and her convenient appearance to aid my escape. I did not want to disappoint her, but I had no choice.

I shook my head. "I'm not much of a story teller."

Her eyes grew grave and she cocked her head to one side as though considering this. The gesture was very adult and so in contrast to the little girl with bad dreams that I once more put up my guard.

"Macbeth told me that you are a man of many tales."

I made a great show of looking behind me. "Sorry. It appears that I am not."

She giggled and the age fell out of her gaze and she became once more the little girl. It was

disquieting how she bounced between child and adult mannerisms so flexibly. I supposed slavery could do that to a person.

"I came to tell you that breakfast has been served in the study so that you can eat undisturbed."

"Will Macbeth be there?" I asked.

"He is in town on business. He should return soon though."

She led me down the corridor to the stairs we had climbed the night before. Sun streamed through clerestory windows, illuminating the entry hall. The marbled floors and wood paneling were even richer by daylight. We crossed the landing and a few steps further on stood before the study.

She opened the door and ushered me in.

The desk had been completely cleared. A tray full of food sat on top of the dark wood.

She left me and I fell upon the meal like an invading army.

When I finished, I filled my pipe and strolled around the room. The fire had burned down to ashes and traces of wood smoke lingered in the air. A mid morning sun burned through the windows. I pulled off my boots and stepped into the sunlight, feeling the warmth of the densely woven carpet against my feet.

Relaxed and full of food, I gazed out the windows for a few moments, going through my options. The thought occurred to me that in spite of his assurances last night, Macbeth might even now be at the harbor arranging my quiet removal. I had better move quickly to secure a guide who could set me on the road to Enion.

I should have left at that moment, but the tapestry beckoned once more, and recalling my resolution from the night before, I turned to study it.

From my new vantage point, I saw the whole of the weaving. It hung on the wall, intangible, like an oasis sprung from someone's imagination. Graymalkin had done a superior job in capturing Enion's beauty—the glittering palace and behind, a dark brooding mountain flanked by a forest of shadow and mist.

It was baffling to look at this place knowing that it existed; that I ruled the land, and yet, knew nothing about the country. I had no idea what the people were like, what their customs were. Had someone taken my place in my absence? Would I be welcomed when I returned?

At that moment, the sun must have risen enough that the Enion tapestry glowed startlingly like a richly textured arabesque. My emotions from last night returned, and for a brief moment, I experienced a distinct impression that surprised me by the lightning-like intensity with which it affected my senses. My skin tingled with anticipation, and I thought I could step from this room into the tapestry and onto Enion's glittering walls. With a longing that defied reason, I crossed the room, reached out and pressed my palm against the weaving, fully expecting to walk through like a doorway into another world. But the sensation vanished as soon as I touched the fabric. The weaving, though spectacularly detailed and brilliant in its colors, could convey me to no other place. Still, I stood there for some time awed at its effect upon me and wondering why such a feeling should emerge in the first place.

At last, I sighed and stepped back, taking in all of the weaving. I traced a path that bore upward along the mountain's steeply sloped and wooded sides toward its summit. And suddenly, I knew this peak. I had often scaled its rocky cliffs and traveled through its lush valleys and deep cirques. My brow beaded with sweat as I strived to remember the name. It came to me. The mountain was Tirach Mir! And this name opened up a cataract of information.

Flowing down its flanks, even to crags high above the sea, ran the shadowy forest of

Mistelwood with its gigantic smokewood trees, their violet-striped leaves the size of elephant ears, and snowberry bushes, with fruit as delicate as frost in moonlight. I had hunted in that forest with a giant of a man. Peer! He possessed guileless eyes and he would do nothing to betray me. That was why I trusted him. But his honesty was not the reason why I had . . . and my memory faltered, for the only word I could think of was 'created'. But I could not imagine how it could be possible that I created Peer. Though I knew at that moment why, and this detail presented a different sort of conundrum. He protected Adella.

I stared hard at the tapestry, hoping the vibrant images might give me another clue to stimulate my memory. After a few minutes, I was straining, but any hints eluded me. The brick wall metaphor and nothing I could do could set me beyond its impediment.

Below the palace, the land sloped away through a city of stone and wood, ending in sable sands and a harbor filled with fine tall ships riding on jade seas.

Then I knew what had bothered me the night before. The sands should have been magenta. It seemed terribly important to me that the sands had to be the exact color. Otherwise it was impossible to . . . I strained to complete the thought but nothing more came of it. Once more, a lapse in my memory at a crucial point when a piece of information could have explained my presence on this strange world where I found myself stranded. The gaps had the sensation of a surgeon excising neural tissue which retained selective remembrances.

The door opened suddenly and Morgan stood breathless in the entry. Her riding cloak hung awry on her shoulders and her long red hair spilled around her face. Her mouth contorted in a grimace of fear and loathing.

"You must flee!" she gasped. "Macbeth is going to betray you."

I was frozen but a second. The knowledge that I had suspected something like this might happen, jolted me to action.

Sounds of running feet on the stairs behind Morgan.

I yanked her into the study and slammed the door. I threw the bar on this side into place as several bodies crashed into the wood at once. The door shuddered but was thick and sturdy. It would take whoever sought me on the other side several minutes to break through. But I did not intend to be here when they succeeded.

"Macbeth's bolt hole! Where is it?" I asked Morgan, keeping my voice low so the slavers could not hear me.

She looked at me blankly.

I grabbed her arms and shook her roughly. "Don't take me for a fool. Your guardian lives in a dangerous city and works in a dangerous profession. He has another way out of here. Where is it?"

"You're hurting me!" she cried out.

I did not loosen my grip.

"In a few minutes, men are going to crash through that door and then they will be hurting me and you."

A large banging came from the other side of the door and I heard the sound of axes biting into the wood.

Still she hesitated.

"Your life is in as much danger as mine. Macbeth will know you warned me."

Macbeth had been right about her wits. The last decided her.

"This way," she hissed.

I followed, grabbing my boots on the way.

She went into the washroom where she pushed the upper corner of a panel beside the wash basin. The wall slid open and we rushed through. She stopped for a second and lit the tongues of a candelabrum before closing the panel behind her and throwing a bar to block it. At the same time, I heard loud splintering in the study.

She led the way down a narrow set of stairs barely wider than my shoulders. Her cloak billowed after her. How the candle flames stayed lit I did not know. The air turned cooler and I noticed the walls were no longer wood but earth. We continued for another ten yards or so and reached bottom.

Morgan flew along a narrow corridor until she came to a ladder set into the earthen wall with metal spikes. She handed me the candlestick and climbed upward into a blackness beyond the flame's reach. I heard her fumbling with a catch and a sliver of light shone briefly above me. I hastily doused the candles with wetted fingers.

I climbed after her.

"We're beneath the stables," Morgan whispered. "I think I heard someone."

I nodded and put my finger to my lips, though I doubted she could see my gesture in the gloom, so I placed it against her mouth. She fell silent. I reached past her and raised the trapdoor just enough for me to see. The barn appeared clear on three sides though I could not be certain of the area behind us.

I pushed the door open slowly, hoping I could maintain some kind of surprise with our entrance. Two men stood with their backs to us, facing the doorway into the courtyard.

I vaulted silently onto the straw covered floor. Neither man noticed. I reached them in two steps, and grabbing them by the necks, smashed their heads together. They fell without crying out. I knelt down to finish them but there was no need. One man's head twisted at an unnatural angle and the other's eyes rolled back in their sockets. Both carried knives and bludgeons. Since I was already armed, I did not strip them.

Morgan clambered out of the well as nimbly as I had. She raced to the stalls. I went after her and found her leading two horses into the open space. They were twins, at least fifteen hands tall at the shoulders, chestnut colored across massive chests, blending to sorrel along the flanks and sprinkled with gray and white spots throughout the body.

"Meet Phobos and Deimos, Macbeth's favorite mounts," she explained.

Both were already saddled and I stopped short. She saw my look of suspicion and smiled, the age in her eyes very prevalent.

"I wondered why Macbeth went into town this morning. Normally he takes me riding on this day. I took the precaution to be ready in case he planned some kind of ambush."

We mounted and I grabbed her bridle.

"Once more I am forced to ask why you are helping me."

She flicked a glance at her hip where the factor's mark branded her.

"Macbeth might talk of me as his ward, but I am as much a prisoner in his house as any slave he has ever traded." Her voice became brittle. "Yes, I know who he is . . . what he does. More's the point, I know the plans he has for me when I am . . . older."

The thought of sexual slavery, a perversion even greater than the normal mode of bondage to a master, caused my violent part to flare anew. A part of me hoped we would run into Macbeth as we left and I would have a chance to trample him.

We headed out of the barn and along the drive. Fortunately, we encountered no one. Soon we were cantering away from the harbor toward the foothills behind Thereon. We were still among the domains of the rich and famous. I pulled my cloak's cowl over my head and Morgan

adjusted hers. To anyone we passed, we were two riders out for a morning excursion. The streets were broad, cobblestoned and well maintained. We passed by several estates, some larger than my would be host's, all ornate and sumptuous.

About ten minutes into our escape, we entered a broad park, which we crossed at a gallop. I saw ahead a wall and above it two turrets marking a gate. A squad of soldiers stood in front of a low rail closing it off.

Morgan drew her horse to a halt inside a grove of trees, where we remained invisible.

"Hare's Gate," she said breathlessly.

"Aye," I replied knowingly so that she would not think me ignorant of Thereon and its layout. "Appropriately named."

She laughed, but I didn't like the feeling of a rabbit chased by hounds, even if no other way to protect myself presented itself.

"We'll need to find the way to Enion before Macbeth catches up with us. It is the only place that will be safe for us," I added.

"Perhaps." I noted a reluctance in her voice.

"Do you know of a better place than Enion?" I said.

She didn't answer right away but gazed at the gate.

"Will it be safe for me?" she asked unexpectedly, turning toward me. The stone color of her eyes stared flatly.

"It should be," I answered without promising.

"Will you promise me your protection?"

I didn't know with any surety that I could. For all I knew, the persons responsible for my lying on the sand at Thereon's harbor might now control Enion, though I did not think that possible with Peer living. Still, Morgan knew the only way out of Thereon, and I would have promised her anything and worry later about whether I could or should keep my word.

"I will give you all the protection that I can as long as I live."

My answer seemed to satisfy her.

"Beyond the gate is a seldom used road that leads into Thereon's forest and mountains. Once we are within their shadows, no one will find us. The way to Enion lies hidden within its fastness."

I nodded and started my horse forward. She grabbed my bridle.

"Some of Macbeth's men are among the soldiers," she hissed. "You can't just ride up to them. When they spot you and me on his favorite horses, they'll arrest us for certain."

Six stood in front of the barrier and how many more within the towers I couldn't guess. I could see pikes and swords among them and I had no doubt that a few carried crossbows. I didn't like the odds fighting them. But going back wasn't an option, and I couldn't see any other way out of the city in the direction we headed.

I asked, "How good a rider are you? Can you jump that barrier?"

She eyed the railing and nodded.

We came out of the park at a walk. Morgan followed at a respectful distance like a servant. We kept our cowls covering our faces.

As we neared the gate, the guards turned their attention toward us, but still they did not ready their weapons. A soldier with three stripes on one sleeve walked forward with the universal swagger of a policeman who knows he is in control.

It's a fallacy that a horse has to be at a dead run in order to clear a barrier. Anyone who has ever been at an equestrian competition knows that a canter will do the job . . . if the horse

trusts the rider.

Twenty paces from the gate, I kicked my horse into a trot, drawing my blade at the same time. The man with three stripes managed to unsheathe his sword. I was beside him before he could do anything with it. I slashed him across the neck and blood sprayed my mount's withers. I didn't have time to look around me, but my ears told me that Morgan's horse was just behind mine.

The others scattered except for a single pikeman. He tried to bring his spear to bear but Phobos was already sailing forward over the barrier. His front hooves clipped the guard in the collar bone. I heard the crunch of bone and a scream. Another jolt rattled my spine as we struck the road on the other side. I rolled with the horse's motion and quirted him into a gallop. A crossbow bolt sung by my ear. Stretching out along my horse's neck, I pressed my lips against his ear and screamed, urging him faster. He responded with a burst of speed. I twisted so that I could see behind me. Morgan lay along Deimos's neck a length behind, but her horse carried less weight and gained rapidly. More bolts whizzed around us but we quickly raced outside their range.

Beyond the gate, the road ran across a level pasture into a forest. Quickly, huge tropical trees flanked us, gray-green moss hanging in wide swaths from their thick boughs. I heard the sound of water splashing against wood. We passed by a mill and a stream driving the water wheel. A mile later the road became a trace. Morgan took the lead. From here on the way lay toward dense mountains, their stony precipices winking through the foliage at us.

* * *

The path ran steep and stony, and several times we had to dismount and lead the horses. But we climbed steadily, sparing neither ourselves nor the animals. After nearly an hour, we stopped at a promontory high above the city to catch our breath. Above us the mountains rose on crags of black shining rock, topped by brimless caps of snow.

Below us Thereon lay nestled in its cove. The Ispian Sea spread out to the horizon; several sailing vessels, their canvas filled with wind, lay heeled over cutting through the choppy water. Garlands of wood smoke curled among the buildings and drifted upward with the wind. The scene looked like a picture from a fairy tale, and I imagined I could hear the clang of stithies, the clatter of carriages and the laughter of children.

Then, I saw a steady stream of people walking from the wharves in a curiously syncopated step, and I realized they were a chain gang. At that moment, I thought that such a detestable city as Thereon so close to my beautiful Enion an unforgivable insult, and I vowed that I would return one day and burn every auction block and scuttle every slave ship until the Ispian Sea's wine dark waters were free of slavers forever.

I scanned our backtrail as sharply as possible for any riders. By now Macbeth should have confirmed from the soldiers at Hare's Gate that we had come this way, but I could see no posse on the sections of the trail visible from our perch. Still, the old saw, 'better safe than sorry' pushed us onward as soon as we felt refreshed.

The tropical trees ceased as we gained more altitude and entered a forest of pine and yew. Though the sun sat directly overhead, the air became cooler and I was glad we had brought cloaks.

A few miles farther on, Morgan veered off the trail and guided Deimos up a creek. I followed, acutely aware of our new path's implication. The dense undergrowth covering the

banks quickly swallowed us and I relaxed since I didn't see how anyone could track us in here. Morgan left the stream after about an hour. Our new trail seemed not to be a path at all but twisted and turned among the trees like a maze. Just when I thought we must be hopelessly lost and going in circles, the wood opened unexpectedly onto a glade. In the center an arch of silver spanned the clearing from one side to the other. Within, a deep gray mist swirled silently.

"Passage to Enion," Morgan whispered and looked at me as though I should somehow recognize it.

I suppose Lord Qweg would have understood, and therefore I should have agreed in order to show that I knew the score. After all, she was right, for all I knew; and though I realized that I should not appear ignorant or afraid, it seemed, from the unnatural forest opening and now this fog-shrouded arch, where we could not see what lay even five feet beyond, we could be riding directly into a trap.

"I don't know about this," I said, trying to sound like I knew what was going to happen but didn't approve.

She tilted her head slightly; her eyes gleamed and a queer smile broke the blasé lines of her face. I had the feeling that she was judging me to see if I were stalwart enough to follow her through this gate.

She said with a touch of scorn in her voice, "Getting cold feet?"

The hair on the back of my neck rose and the violence that lay just beneath the surface spilled into my limbs. With an effort, I forced myself to stop trembling.

"I'm not afraid, if that is what you are hinting at," I answered through clenched teeth.

"Good. Because this path is the only way, unless you want to return to Thereon and try your luck with Macbeth."

I shook my head.

She nodded hers in return, as if to say, 'Alright, we are agreed to go forward.' Then, "Remember the procedure. Single file; stay directly behind me. Make certain your horse steps where mine does. Do exactly what I do at all times."

I nodded, though I did not recall the procedure she laid out. However, I noticed real fear in her voice as she spoke these words, and it pleased me that she was not as unperturbed as she let on. At the same time, I wondered what I was letting myself in for as I watched her pass through the arch and the grayness swallowed her and the sounds of her horse.

After a few steps, I followed: the frying pan and the fire argument, but what choice did I have, I reasoned. So I eased the rapier into its sheath and urged my horse forward.

. . . to be continued next month

Mark Reeder currently works for Centre Communications as a writer researcher for educational videos. His short fiction has been published on the web at Deep Magic, Quantum Muse and Dark Planet. The science fiction fantasy novel, "A Dark Knight for the King," co-authored by Ron Meyer, is available from Publish America as a POD through Barnes and Noble and Amazon.com. He has a Master's degree in history from the University of Cincinnati and has studied the martial arts for thirty years. Mark lives in Boulder, Colorado.

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